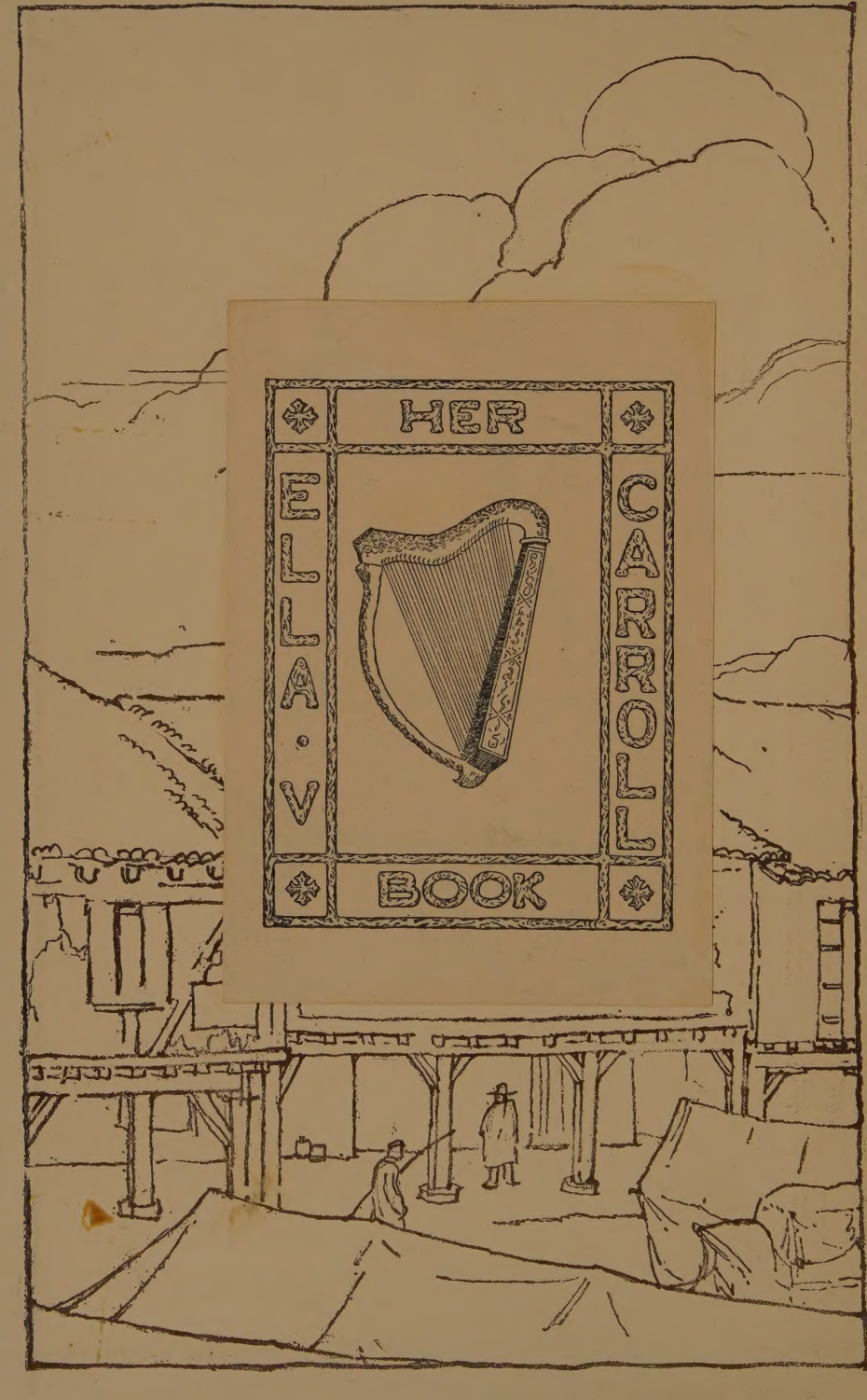
Abbé Pierre's People

Jay William Hudson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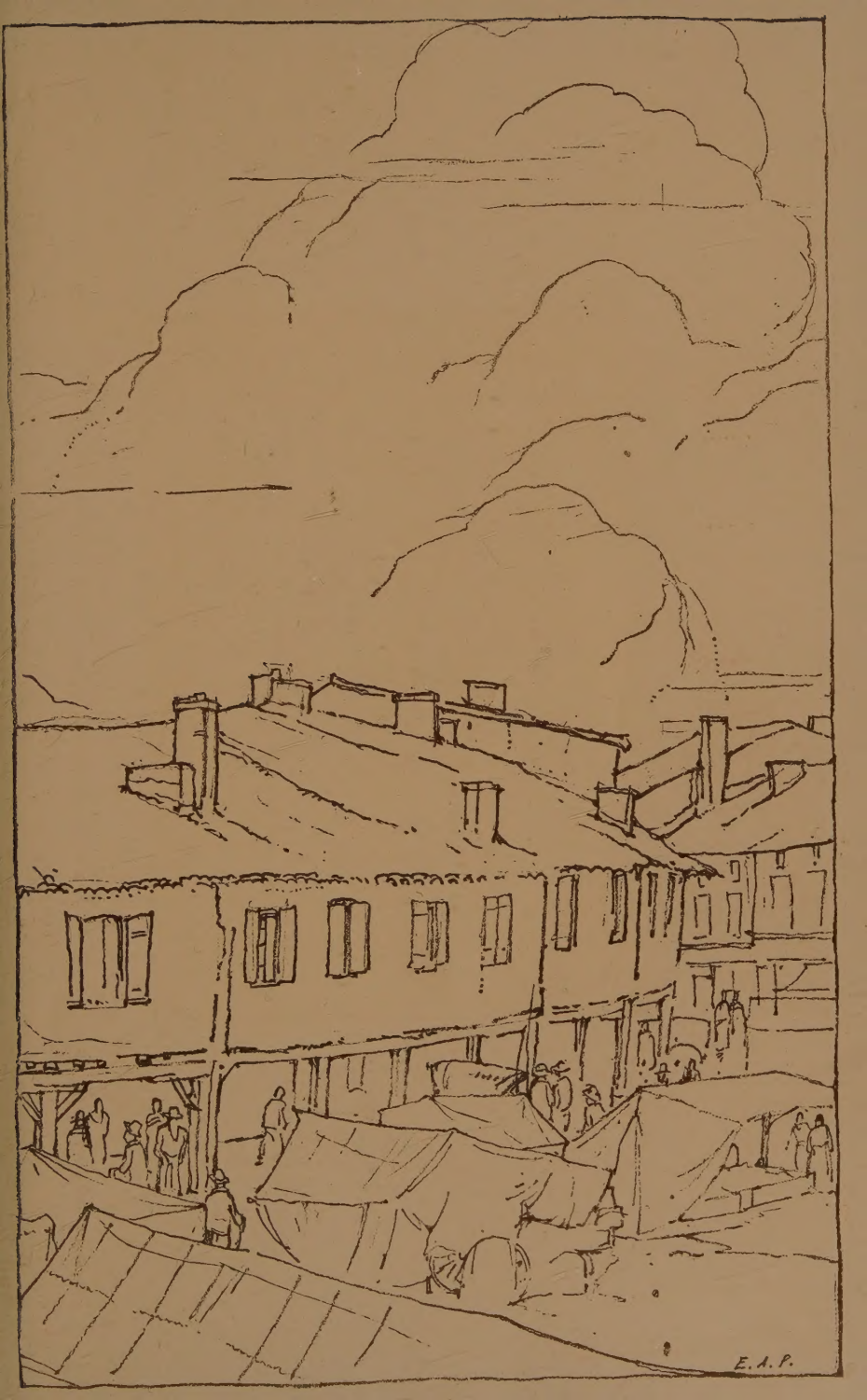
E.A.P.

ABBÉ PIERRE'S PEOPLE

By JAY WILLIAM HUDSON

ABBÉ PIERRE'S PEOPLE
ABBÉ PIERRE
THE ETERNAL CIRCLE
NOWHERE ELSE IN THE WORLD
THE TRUTHS WE LIVE BY
THE COLLEGE AND NEW AMERICA

ABBÉ PIERRE'S PEOPLE

BY

JAY WILLIAM HUDSON

D. APPLETON & COMPANY
New York London
1928

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To

JEAN-LOUIS SANSOT

AND

MARIE SANSOT

WHO SLEEP IN THE SHADOWS

OF THE CYPRESS TREES

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ABBÉ PIERRE'S PEOPLE

I

SIDONIE'S EAR

Sidonie's ear pained her considerably. It had begun yesterday, when she was down at the pool, rinsing her clothes. Maybe she had got some water into it—she could not tell. To-day, at Madame Lagarde's, where she had gone to sew, she could hardly keep her mind on her work; and, in consequence, she had to undo several mistakes in the dress she was making.

Sidonie's temper was not of the best at any time, as her aged mother and semi-invalid sister would have regretfully admitted. Now, with this affliction added, the little seamstress's sharp tongue became still more acrid, until the ears of those about her suffered little less than her own.

There are those who deserve sympathy, but for whom it is difficult for one to have it. One feels that people with tempers have souls strong enough to bear their own sorrows. That was the way with Sidonie's household to-night. So, after supper, feeling much self-pity, she put her shawl over her head and went over next door to see her neighbor, old Marinette.

Marinette's door was wide open to let in whatever daylight there was left; for Marinette was thrifty, and

saved the *essence*. Sometimes, when the moon came up early, it gave light enough through the square window, so that she did not have to use the lamp at all. As Sidonie drew near, she could hear Marinette moving about on the hard, clay floor—she was probably clearing the supper table—and the sound of a male voice told her that her son, Emile,—himself an old man—was sitting there as usual, sprawled in front of the fireplace, after his long day in the vineyard.

Sidonie stepped from the road onto the flagstone in front of the door.

"Hé! Marinette!" she called shrilly.

There was a noise of slow, lumbering footsteps, and Marinette's generous frame loomed dimly in the doorway, and, recognizing her neighbor, her big, lazy voice bade Sidonie a cordial, *"Entrez!"*

As Sidonie entered the dark kitchen, Emile got up with effort, and, muttering that he must see to something, moved clumsily outside, toward the barn. He had had a hard day, and did not care to listen to the gossip of women.

"My ear! Oh, my ear!" the seamstress moaned, as she felt for the chair Emile had vacated. Her hand was clapped over the offending member, and her body swayed to and fro with the pain. *"Bou Diou!* It gets worse and worse!"

"Perhaps, by to-morrow . . ."

"I tell you, it gets no better! I shall go crazy with it!"

"Where does it hurt?"

"Hurt? It hurts all over! It goes deep down into the bones of the head. Oh!"

Marinette walked over to a shelf, and took down a candle. Then she got her pack of sulphur matches from a tin box over the fireplace, broke off one, and struck it. It slowly sputtered into a flame, and soon she was holding the candle over Sidonie's right ear.

"Aïe! Aïe! Don't touch it! Don't touch it! . . . Do you see anything?"

"It is red. . . . M-m! . . . In front of the ear, it is a little red, too." Marinette inclined her heavy body and looked again. "Yes, and in the neck, back of the ear."

"It is terrible! As you see, I have removed my earrings; even my earrings hurt me."

Marinette put the candle on the table and sat down. "Have you done something to cure it?"

"I put oil in it—warm oil—but it didn't do any good. I put oil in it twice. Oh! Oh! I am afraid I must go to the doctor!"

"H-m! There is nothing against the doctor. . . . But . . . did you try bathing your feet in hot water boiled with nettles?"

"Nettles!"

"Yes. When I have rheumatism in my knees, I get some nettles and boil them in water, and then I soak my feet in the water; also, I take fresh nettles and rub them on my knees. . . ."

"But this is not rheumatism, so what good is that? . . . No, I can't stand it any longer! I shall get away from Madame Lagarde's to-morrow long enough to go to the doctor."

"Well, as you know, he is to be seen after dinner. It is perhaps best. Dr. Dousset may make it stop hurt-

ing." Marinette had little use for doctors; but the little doctor was her neighbor, and she had known him for many years.

"I shall not go to Dr. Dousset. I shall go to Dr. Pouy."

Marinette's big hands raised themselves in surprise. This Dr. Pouy was the son of a local baker, who had been away studying medicine, and had come back to the village only the preceding summer.

"Dr. Pouy!"

"Yes. I have a subscription with Dr. Pouy for the year."

"Ha! Pouy!"

"Why not Dr. Pouy, I should like to know?" Sidonie demanded with some spirit. She had arisen, and, for the moment, had forgotten about her ear. She resented Marinette's tone.

"All the doctors . . . they are useless enough. But this Pouy! He is too young to doctor people. What made you subscribe with Dr. Pouy?"

Sidonie's brittle temper broke. "Why did I subscribe with Dr. Pouy? Well, that is entirely my business, do you hear? I would thank people not to meddle in things that don't concern them! One can choose one's own doctor, or, one can go without a doctor, as some people do, because they think they know everything! You and your nettles!" And Sidonie flung out the door from the presence of a Marinette red with indignation at Sidonie's shrill sarcasms. Trembling, Marinette went to the door and shut it violently after the retreating figure of her neighbor.

The fact is, Sidonie was angry with herself as much

as with old Marinette. Now that she really had something the matter with her, she wished that her *abonnement* was with Dr. Dousset, whose reputation was assured for miles around. The people thought so much of "the little doctor" that they had elected him their mayor time after time. The wealthy Monsieur Caperan had tried to run against him once; but what chance had he? None whatever! All the afternoon on market-day, the peasants came to consult him at his house on the Road of the Madonna, and you could see a long row of them in the hallway, awaiting their turn to be called by his quick, brusque voice into the room he used for his *bureau*. From far out in the country they sent for him—sometimes by a casual messenger who could not even give the name of the sick family that had hailed him as he passed; he could only tell on what road it was, and about how far, and the doctor had to find his patient as best he could.

One wouldn't think a woman of Sidonie's age would be so silly; but when the baker's son, young and good-looking, came back and put out his brass sign, engraved with:

DR. ALEXIS POUY
FACULTÉ DE L'UNIVERSITÉ DE PARIS

she was caught by his glamour. He had actually studied at Paris . . . think of that! And Dr. Dousset had only studied at Toulouse. Besides, once or twice, lately, Dr. Dousset, his mind on other things, had failed to notice her as he hurried down the road; while Dr. Pouy had smiled at her with a professional courtesy which im-

pressed her greatly: "*Bonjour,* Mademoiselle Labat!" he had said graciously, in his best Parisian manner and removing his hat. She had actually blushed with pleasure.

So she had gone to him and paid him in advance the 15 francs necessary to retain his services for the year, with an additional 10 francs each for her mother and sister—much to their distress, for had not the little doctor always taken excellent care of them?

But, strange to relate, whatever Alexis Pouy had learned in far away Paris, Sidonie's ear, *hélas!* got no better, in spite of sundry sprayings with syringes and diverse stuffings with cotton appropriately medicated. His suave assurances sounded well enough in her good ear; but they only aggravated her bad one, since it felt no easement. Not only the ear itself hurt her, but the glands about it had begun to swell, until the whole side of her head throbbed. When she felt inside the ear, there was one place especially tender; it was as if a boil were forming there: a boil that felt as large as the *mairie,* although she could not see it.

At last, Sidonie began to suspect the Faculty of the University of Paris and had decided leanings toward Toulouse. More than ever, she wished that she had had the sense to continue her subscription with the little doctor. The next time she went to see Dr. Pouy, his professional smile slowly died away when she sharply reminded him that, thus far, he had done her no good whatever.

"But one must have patience, Mademoiselle! I do the best I can!"

At this moment, Sidonie's ear felt a pang acuter than

usual. She spoke with a vehemence that surprised Dr. Pouy:

"That is the trouble! It's the best you can do. Which is nothing! Nothing at all! And, in the meantime, I get worse!"

Dr. Pouy examined the ear again, minutely. As he raised himself from it, he pronounced, "There is only one thing left: it will have to be lanced."

"An operation!" cried Sidonie in alarm.

"Ah, no, Mademoiselle. It is a small matter. It is over in one brief little moment."

"An operation!" Sidonie was thrilled that her trouble had assumed such pretensions. What a stir it would make among her friends! An operation! Still, her sudden feeling of importance was at once nullified by her fear. She bethought herself of the only operation she had ever known about. Before it had happened, Dr. Dousset had called in a surgeon from Auch for a consultation. This case of hers, too—no doubt a consultation would be necessary. She said as much to Dr. Pouy.

He laughed. "It is not at all needful, Mademoiselle. One does not consult in a little matter like this!"

But Sidonie was adamant. An operation properly conducted certainly meant a consultation, or it meant nothing. She was not to be cheated. Besides—who knew—perhaps if Dr. Dousset were called in, he would not find the operation advisable. Dr. Dousset was a kind man. Sidonie insisted.

Dr. Pouy's professional dignity was hurt. Still, he was only just beginning to get the foothold of a practice. He must humor his patient. He said, stiffly:

"If you so desire, I can call in consultation my friend,

Dr. Gaujac, at Plaisance. It is not at all customary, and the fee will be extra. But if you wish . . ."

"What do I know about your Dr. Gaujac? Why not Dr. Dousset?"

Dr. Pouy shrugged his shoulders. To consult with the man he regarded as his rival, especially on a ridiculous little case like this! Still—he must be politic.

"As I say, it is not at all necessary. But, if you insist, it shall be done."

So, the consultation duly occurred. It happened the next day, at Sidonie's house, which was neutral ground. After a brief, but thorough examination, Dr. Dousset walked out to the road with his colleague. He announced that, in his opinion, no lancing was necessary, at least for the present. Dr. Pouy made haste to disagree. While they disputed the case, Sidonie, who had been straining her good ear to no avail, could wait no longer, and hastened out to demand the outcome. Dr. Dousset had politely moved away down the road toward his house. Dr. Pouy told her.

"It is for me to choose, then, is it not? Well, it happens I prefer to do as Dr. Dousset says!"

Right here, Dr. Pouy's patience gave out. He was already piqued by the brusque certainty of his colleague in casting his own opinion aside. He spoke with unprofessional spleen:

"I wash my hands of the whole matter, then. You will not take my advice. Evidently, there is nothing further I can do!" And the offended young physician picked up his bag and strode toward the village.

After that, the case became Dr. Dousset's, somewhat against his will; for he was a stickler for professional

etiquette. Sidonie went to his house for treatment on the two succeeding days. On the evening of the second, she again went over and called on old Marinette. These two had battled too often to have nursed their last quarrel. Emile had gone to the village. Minou, the cat, was curled up by the door. She would not move; one had to step over her.

"The ear? It is no better. But what can one do? I have gone to Dr. Pouy, and now I go to Dr. Dousset. As far as I can see, one is as good as the other. I still suffer."

Now, old Marinette, as hinted before, did not believe in doctors, or faculties of medicine, whether in Paris or Toulouse. Like a good many peasants, she went to a doctor only as a last resource. For ordinary ailments, she had sundry strange recipes, common enough among the superstitious, in which she had sublime faith. The use of nettles for rheumatism was only one of them. For sore eyes, she applied the dew taken from the leaves of thistles before sunrise on the morning of St. John's day. If remedies such as these failed, well —let it be admitted in a whisper—there were the *"guérisseurs,"* whom everybody knew about, a queer, clandestine tribe of healers, commonly referred to as *"sorciers,"* whose magic charms could dispel any disease much more efficaciously than any medicine.

These *sorciers* were usually of peasant stock. Their secret formulas descended from father to son. Sometimes, the mere touch of a *sorcier* would do away with the spell one was under; sometimes incantations were necessary also. They took pay; but they seldom charged as much as the doctors, which was to their advantage.

Of course, good Catholics were solemnly warned by the priests to avoid them—but it is hard to uproot superstitions centuries old. It was well known that they prayed not to God, but to the Devil.

This time, while the two women sat in the dark kitchen, Marinette was thinking of a *sorcier* she knew of, who had been very successful. After awhile, she got up heavily and went toward the door—a rectangle of gray dusk, through which the clack-clack of passing sabots could be heard. She pushed Minou into the room, closed the door, and came back. She was silent for a long time. Sidonie could see that she had something on her mind. Finally, she leaned toward Sidonie and spoke in a voice so low that, even if the door had been open, no one could have overheard her:

"There was the Sénac child. She was sick. The doctors gave her up. They took the feathers out of her pillow and burned them where the road to Demu crosses the road to Parré. In three days, she was well."

Sidonie had heard of this case. It was common gossip. She reviewed the details as she had heard them. Before she could speak, Marinette resumed:

"Michel's baby was burned on the neck with live coals. The *sorcier* came at night. The baby was still screaming. He said some words and touched it. All at once, the baby stopped crying and went to sleep."

Dimly, Sidonie began to see whither all this tended. She was afraid. This kind of talk was forbidden ground. It shocked her scruples even to listen, for she was religious. Still, she was also curious. The unavoidable question occurred to her: What if her ear could be cured as easily as that?

Marinette went on: "There was Baquieu's ox. It had the distemper. It was going to die. The veterinary could do nothing. But the *sorcier*—he saved it."

"What did he do?" This, breathlessly, from Sidonie.

"He hung a little bag of oats on its forehead, just between the horns."

Sidonie put her hand on Marinette's ample knee, and said:

"I heard something about Marie."

"She had a swelling like yours. Only, it was on the neck. She got it because she talked with Jeanne Lespiet and let her get close enough to breathe on her. That very evening she became sick."

"And did the *sorcier* cure her, too?"

"He cured her. He is the seventh son, that *sorcier*. A person has a swelling—like you. Well, one who is a seventh son like this *sorcier*, he says words and touches it, and it goes away."

"Immediately?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes it takes three days. Sometimes, seven."

Sidonie leaned over closer. She asked the momentous question. It took almost more courage than she had:

"Would it be possible . . . could one . . . could one . . . see this *sorcier?*"

There! It was out! Sidonie trembled.

"Ah, no! You do not want a *sorcier!*"

Sidonie became bolder. "But suppose I have made up my mind! . . . Only, I can not have him come to my house. My mother would not allow it."

Marinette considered. Finally, "Perhaps it could be

managed." But Marinette would commit herself to nothing further, for the time being.

Sidonie went home with a guilty conscience. She could not sleep. A dozen times in the night she decided to have nothing to do with this fearsome traffic with unseen powers. But by morning the pain in her ear submerged her conscience, and she gathered resolution. She spent the day sewing for the people in the château south of the village. When she came home, she had to pass Marinette's house; but her door was closed, and neither she nor Emile was anywhere about.

"Perhaps," thought Sidonie, "she has gone to see about the *sorcier*."

While she was finishing supper, Emile came to her door. She opened it, and, seeing who it was, stepped outside and closed it after her. Emile had this message: his mother wanted to see her.

As soon as she could get away, she hastened over. When she was inside, Marinette told her the momentous news in three words:

"It is arranged!"

She was seized with a panic. Arranged! Now that she was face to face with the consummation of her folly, she felt that she could go no further with it. But even while she tried to find tongue to her fears, Marinette went on:

"The moon happens to be right. You are lucky. If it was not to-night, you would have to wait a long time. At ten o'clock, he will see you. You go up the forest road, past the *monjeau*. When you get to the edge of the woods, the road turns to the right, and a path crosses it. Be there at ten o'clock. He says Emile

can go with you. He knows Emile. It is Emile that saw him. . . . Ah! But, yes, you must take money—seven francs."

"But I have been thinking it over. I will not go! No, I have changed my mind!"

Old Marinette thought it was the price that was troubling her friend, so she reminded her:

"The doctor charges ten francs for one little visit in the country, when you haven't a subscription. Even if he has to go only one kilometer! Seven francs is cheap! You cannot complain."

"It is not the money . . ."

"It is all fixed, then. Emile will be ready. He will wait for you a little up the forest road. You need not be afraid."

Sidonie went home. Her brain was in a tumult. Should she go, or shouldn't she? At nine o'clock, she had gone to her bedroom. Her mother and sister had retired already. But she herself did not go to bed. As the clock on the *mairie* sounded the half hour, she opened the front door of her house with infinite caution, and stepped out into the moonlight. She stealthily crossed the road, almost under the statue of the Virgin, and kept along the darkened side, close to the high hedge, praying that nobody would see her. She passed Dr. Dousset's house—there was still a light in the hallway, and her heart went pit-a-pat for fear that some one might be up and about and notice her. But her fears were groundless. A little after passing the silent front of Lignac's blacksmith shop, she plunged into the deep shadows of a by-street and a few minutes later had turned north on the little-used forest road, where

there were very few houses, and where the trees made dark patches of eerie gloom.

A hundred yards farther on, where the road began to rise sharply, a dim, shuffling figure moved, phantom-like, into the road and joined her. It was Emile. They walked along, saying nothing. Emile was not a talker, and Sidonie was too full of forebodings to break the silence. Only, she wished that Emile's sabots did not make so much noise. She felt that they could be heard a mile away. It was hard to keep up with him. For every step of his, the little seamstress had to take two.

The ascent became still harder and the road narrowed. Soon, an open space on the right revealed the yawning pit of the rock quarry, fantastic under the moon, like some ghostly amphitheatre. As they approached the isolated farmhouse known as the *monjeau,* a dog began to bark furiously, and kept it up until they were well beyond.

They were now nearing the rendezvous; the road became steeper and more rugged; to their right stretched a wilderness of gorse and broom, and just ahead of them the forest loomed, dark and forbidding. At length they entered its outskirts, and came to a little clearing, where the path crossed the road almost at right angles. Sidonie would not have seen it; but Emile stopped her, saying:

"This is the place!"

His voice was low; but it made her jump as if a cannon had gone off.

She looked about fearfully. Although the moon clearly lit the little open space, she could see nobody.

"He is not here!" she whispered.

Somehow, she was relieved. She was beginning to hope he would not come.

From far down in the village was wafted the bell of the *mairie*—ten blunt strokes. A moment later she detected a faint sound of footsteps on the path from the direction of the forest. Nearer and nearer they came, until the juniper bushes parted, and a man's form emerged into the moonlight. She could not see him very clearly, and she was in no condition to notice details—but, later, when she tried to remember how he looked, she had the impression that, although he was bent with age, he was very tall, with a beard, and long hair that straggled out from under his *béret*. With a voice cracked and broken, he called Emile to one side and talked with him in low tones. Then he came toward her and held out his hand, demanding his pay in advance.

She had it securely tied up in her handkerchief—the seven francs. She tried to undo the knot, but her fingers were clumsy. After several futile attempts, she hastily dropped the handkerchief and all into his palm. He untied it easily enough and examined the money minutely, counting it carefully with his long, skinny fingers, holding it up to the moonlight—four silver francs, two paper francs, and the rest in ten-centime pieces. Finally, satisfied, he pocketed the money and returned the handkerchief to her; but she could not touch it and it fell to the ground.

The *sorcier* ordered Emile to leave the open space and go down the road seven paces and wait. Then he told Sidonie to step onto the exact center of the cross made by road and path, and look toward the forest.

That put her back to him. It was with difficulty that she kept from screaming. If it had not been for Emile near by, she would have fled as fast as her feet would have carried her—anywhere, to escape. But *could* she escape? No doubt he had power to prevent anything like that. . . . She stood there, trembling all over, with this emissary of the Evil One somewhere back of her. She could feel his burning gaze on the back of her neck.

A moment later, a cloud passed over the face of the moon. The *sorcier* slowly raised his long arms high in the air. His lips moved. He spoke, deliberately at first, then more rapidly, in a monotone, like a chant, words that she had never heard before. Then his uplifted arms descended, although his lips still moved. He approached her. Suddenly she felt the touch of bony fingers over her ear. They pressed, then were removed. Three times, this was repeated. The pain and fright were more than she could endure. She tried to shout; no sound came. What was going to happen? . . . Nothing happened. . . . Was it all over? At last, with a desperate effort, she managed to swing herself around. She dared to raise her eyes and look. . . . There was no one there! The moon had come out from behind its cloud; one could see for several yards, all about the clearing—but there was no one there, although faint sounds of receding steps came from beyond the juniper bushes. Suddenly her head swam; her legs would no longer support her. She sank to the earth.

When she came to herself, Emile was bending over her, bathing her forehead with wet grass. She was very weak. Awkwardly, he helped her to her feet. In a few minutes, she was able to proceed slowly down the hill,

clinging to him, more than once slipping into deep ruts made by wagon-wheels. After a while, she found she could walk by herself; but she kept close to Emile and shudderingly grasped his arm when they went through patches of darkness.

At length, she spoke. "Where did he go?"

"Beyond the forest—toward Cassou; he lives that way."

It was only when they had passed the quarry that she gathered the courage to feel her ear. She dared not be sure, but it did not seem to hurt so much to touch it. Again, as they approached the village, she passed her fingers over it. There was moisture oozing from it. . . . When she got home, and had stolen softly to her bedroom, she dipped a fresh handkerchief in the water of her jug and laved it gently.

The next day, the ear was better—undoubtedly better. On the second day, the swelling had entirely gone down. Each day, she was careful to go to the little doctor as usual, telling him nothing. He kept washing out the ear in warm water, and put cotton in it. On the third day, he said she need not come any more.

That very night, she went over to see Marinette. She was unusually vivacious and talkative. She wore her earrings, and they bobbed about gayly without hurting. Never had she felt more amiable. The proof of it was that the meeting ended in a quarrel worse than usual, this time because, when Sidonie told how brave she had been from first to last that night at the crossroads, Marinette's great bulk sat there shaking with what Sidonie believed to be laughter.

The natural result was that Sidonie confided in oth-

ers, who did not laugh. The whole village of Aignan soon got hold of it, and it gave the gossips plenty to talk about, since it raised a vexatious question, which, trifling in itself, caused violent differences of opinion. The question was this:

The famous ear . . . *who cured it?*

Leaving the gossips out, and listening only to those directly concerned, one learned that Dr. Pouy told his only remaining patient that he himself did, even in spite of unwarrantable interference on the part of Dr. Dousset.

As for Dr. Dousset, he told his wife that he did, although that bungler of a Pouy had irritated it so that it had been extremely difficult.

Marinette told her intimate friends that it was undoubtedly the *sorcier*—although to all others she had a good word for the little doctor.

As for Abbé Pierre, who had nothing to do with it and had not even heard of it—well, Aunt Madeleine at last brought the gossip to his attention, she being careful to keep him posted on everything that happened, whether he wanted to know it or not. Her communication was made at dinner. He was silent and thoughtful during the whole meal. At length he said:

"It is discouraging. Here in my own village, among my own people, there are actually those who still follow after these children of the devil, enemies of all righteousness, full of fraud and depravity, to use the words St. Paul applies to them."

He made as if to rise from the table. But Aunt Madeleine persisted: who did he think effected the cure?

"The question of Sidonie's ear is a minor matter entirely."

"But . . ."

"In his famous dictionary, Pontas, discussing *écrouelles,* says that it is nonsense to suppose that the seventh son has the power of cure. This, he asserts, is reserved to the King of France. . . ."

Aunt Madeleine impatiently interrupted him, telling him not to be absurd by quoting to no purpose authors three hundred years dead, and to say something sensible on the point at issue. But the Abbé refused to take sides, merely remarking:

"It was not the *sorcier,* one may be certain. As for the rest, it is quite possible that the good God intended Sidonie's ear to get well in any event!"

Which exasperated Aunt Madeleine so much that the good Abbé thought it wise to leave her and take refuge in his study. There he presently lit his lamp, and, rummaging about the shelves, at last took down four small tomes by Lebrun, on the *Critical History of Superstitious Practices that Mislead the People and Embarrass the Savants,* which absorbed his attention until it was time to take his usual walk.

II

THE CROWN OF THE MADONNA

I

The Road of the Madonna begins soberly enough at the high-humped rear of the time-battered church, then laughingly escapes by a ragged vestige of the old wall of defense to hurry down past the shop of the lame blacksmith, past the big house and garden of the little doctor, past the humble dwellings of old Marinette and Sidonie, the seamstress, then on past other houses covered with plaster and roofed with red tile, until, at last, it reaches the happy freedom of the hills to the east, with their little vineyards sloping toward the sun.

Now, if you are out on the Road of the Madonna merely for a short walk, you will stop just beyond the edge of the village where the road turns north, in front of an old rectangular house of rough stone, called La Chapelle, with a great wooden cross in its yard—a house alleged to have been a church a thousand years ago, but now, far more certainly, the home of André, the road-mender. Let your walk end here, if you wish; but don't forget that the road would be willing to take you much farther. Indeed, if you had a two-wheeled cart like that of Fitte, the notary, you could follow its many delightful meanderings through the hills to Demu, and Vic-Fezensac, and, finally, to the cathedral

city of Auch, the ancient capital of all this storied Gascony.

The sunshine on the Road of the Madonna is dappled with shade cast by slender plane trees. Cows and geese are forever going up and down, especially at morning and evening; oxen, too, drawing their carts, ponderously swinging their heads from side to side with every leisurely step; herds of black goats, with long, coarse hair; and very pink pigs, all shiny, that look as if they had no hair at all. And always, day in and day out, from early morning until after dusk, the Road of the Madonna echoes with the clop-clop of wooden shoes, as the peasants plod past with red sashes and round, flat caps. Sometimes they look up from the road far away across the vineyards to the south, and they see, startlingly clear, the high line of the snow-topped Pyrenees, fifty miles off.

Some say that the Road of the Madonna was so named because, hundreds of years ago, a peasant, who plowed the field of La Chapelle, seeing his oxen suddenly kneel, dug down and found buried there a statue of the Mother of our Redeemer—the same, they say, that is now enshrined in the village church. That would be a sufficiently good reason for the name of the road; but it is a doubtful one. What is beyond all doubt is that to-day, close beside the road, halfway from the church to La Chapelle, set high on a square, stone pedestal, is a life-size figure of the Queen of all Saints. Like most of the Madonnas of the Pyrenees country, it is fashioned after the Virgin as she appeared to the little peasant girl, Bernadette, at Lourdes, whither all the world now makes a pilgrimage every year. Appro-

priate indeed that a peasant's Virgin should stand here by the side of this, a peasant's road!

The statue on the Road of the Madonna is cast in iron; but you would never guess that, for paint has transformed it into something almost ethereal; so that, as you stand before it in the rustic stillness, you feel as if you were in the very presence of the Virgin most renowned. Her robes are of snowy white, edged at the neck and wrists with gold (*O Holy Mary, Tower of Ivory, pray for us!*), and they fall gracefully in folds that sway a little to the left and back, as if the Mother of Divine Grace had just taken a step forward with her right foot. Those immaculate feet are bare, and against their white purity, as if they had fallen there from Heaven, are little roses of gold (*O Blessed Mother, Mystical Rose, pray for us!*). Her girdle is blue, as befits the Queen of the Sky. A chaplet of white beads, ending with a golden cross, hangs from the right arm of her, our Queen of the Most Holy Rosary, and the graceful hands are held before her in the attitude of prayer. But her face! Ah, the face of this, Our Lady of Lourdes, which Bernadette reported to be that of "a lady more beautiful than a queen"—who shall describe it better than with those very words? We can frankly ignore those who have had the folly to say that the face is insipid. Its exquisite oval, tilted a little to the right, has all the sweet charm of youth; and yet it is the wise and tender Mother that looks out from the blue eyes; the red lips seem almost parting in a gracious smile (*Mother most amiable!*); and lightly set upon the head of the Queen of Angels is a golden crown.

The crown of the Madonna! Quite possibly it is the

most beautiful thing in or around Aignan, partly because of her whom it crowns, and partly because of itself. It is wrought delicately with openwork of light and airy design. The crown's rays are tipped with stars. Its aspect changes very much with the time of day and with the seasons. At noon, the sun flashes from it and transforms its gold into a dazzling halo for her, the Virgin Most Powerful; at sunset, it is the ruddy crown of the Queen of Martyrs; at night, the moonlight steals tenderly upon it and softens it into a fitting diadem for the Virgin Most Merciful. Sometimes, when the night is black and even the stars are hid, a lantern hanging from a cart going by glints upon the stars of that crown, and the passing peasant knows that even there in the darkness the Virgin Most Faithful watches over her own. In winter, the crown fills with snow as white as the Virgin's robe; and, when the snow melts down her blessed face, it is as though the Mother of Sorrows wept.

Other villages round about have their Virgins, too; but they cannot be compared with the one on the Road of the Madonna. Take the one at Sabazan, on its hill two miles to the west; it is full of mistakes. In the first place, the Virgin there is really too near the church to make a procession to her at all worth while. Then, look at the statue itself! Why, the lips are painted much too red, and the eyes are nothing but two perfectly round circles of blue, with white points in the centers, which give her a simple and staring look. Then, of all things, she has an uptilted nose—imagine that! And her crown is broken and falls rakishly askew over her bright ear; and, what is more, the rust is actually coming

through her white robe! But what can one expect? Sabazan is a wholly unimportant place, having only 238 people in the whole commune, while Aignan has nearly five times that many!

The village of Aignan guards its Virgin well. She is surrounded by an iron fence with high palings, in which is a gate that sags on its fastenings of broken wire. Wreaths are always hanging from the corners of this fence. In summer, offerings of fresh flowers are ever at the Virgin's feet, and white lilies bloom in the grass below. And here by the road, the tallest plane tree of all stretches its long branches toward her, as if in gallant protection of our Queen conceived without sin.

Old Marinette, who lives just opposite the statue, can tell you of only one time when anything has happened to mar the quiet vigil of the Virgin Most Prudent. Once, after a wild storm which lasted all night, her crown became loose and was in danger of falling from her head. The next morning, when André, the road-mender, was going by with his donkey and cart, old Marinette stopped him and asked him to fix it. He laughed.

"I mend roads, as you know; also, I cut grass in the ditches, and even trim the hedges and trees; but the Director of Roads and Bridges, he has not yet ordered me to mend Madonnas!"

But that was just talk. For he good-naturedly took the ladder out of Marinette's yard, carried it through the iron gate, which she undid for him, climbed up, and carefully fitted the spikes that projected downward from under the crown into the proper holes in the Virgin's head, so that it was fastened securely once more.

Not every peasant has a chance thus to crown with his own hands the Queen Without Stain!

II

At this time, this very man, André Magnoac, the road-mender, would have told you that few people in the commune lived a happier life than he. True, he had lost his wife; but did he not have his daughter, Paule, who kept house for him, cared for the cow, and made his garden at La Chapelle more sightly and profitable than it had ever been? With what pride had he watched her ripening into womanhood, growing more comely every day! People noticed a certain wistful look in her soft, black eyes, which may have come from his own Vendéenne mother, from whom he, too, surely had borrowed some of his dreamy, abstracted ways; for your pure Gascon is practical and matter-of-fact, and not given to mere dreams.

Oh, any father would have been proud of such a girl! People going out the Road of Madonna past La Chapelle could see how clean and smooth she kept the flagstones by the door; how she brightened the front of the house with a row of potted geraniums, red, white and pink, set on a long board that rested on boxes; and how neatly the fagots were piled on the smooth, yellow clay of the yard. On market days, Paule could be found with the row of women in front of the town hall in the Place, selling the choicest vegetables from her garden, just as her mother did before her.

Paule worshipped the tall, big-boned man that was her father. What if his hair was becoming white and

his walk a little lame? To her, his face, with its rugged contours—the prominent nose, the high cheek-bones, the broad, low forehead, and the eyes that wonderfully softened when they looked at her, was her ideal of everything noble.

Many people shook their heads. This girl, without a mother's care! And at the critical age, too! A road-mender's life means long hours away from home. In summer, it was before five o'clock in the morning when André would hitch his small cart to Caillaux, the donkey—who had been named by the *chiffonnier,* a facetious fellow, from whom André bought her. Then he would start out on the road, and not come back until seven. In winter, it was not quite so bad: only from sunrise to sunset. Paule always saw him off, putting his lunch into a sack of coarse linen to be hung from his shoulder: a chunk of bread with some garlic to rub on it; perhaps a piece of pickled goose boiled in the soup the day before, and some wine. Often, as he sat by the roadside and ate it, with no company but Caillaux, quietly grazing near by, he would think of Paule and of the dowry he was saving against the time when she should be asked in marriage by some young, stalwart peasant—only, where in all Gascony was the peasant worthy of Paule? Then, humming an old patois song, he would resume his work with renewed vigor, adjusting the screen over his eyes, and attacking a pile of rock with his sledge hammer. Old André was a familiar sight on all the roads of the canton, with his gray shirt, open at the throat, his blue jean trousers, in summer a wide-brimmed straw hat with a hand-

kerchief hanging down to shield the back of his neck, and in winter his blue *béret*.

It will be guessed readily enough that an attractive girl like Paule could not escape the attentions of the young gallants of the village; but, although she went to the dances and often joined in the village sports, she seemed to bestow her smiles upon no one more than another. If any one of them hoped to win this handsome daughter of Gascony for his own, he derived his hope from within himself, not from her. She seemed perfectly happy with the daily routine of her tasks and her quiet life with her father.

That is, until one October, on market day, when Hector Dufour, just home on leave from his military service, came over to Aignan. Although he lived in Sabazan, Paule had known him ever since she was a little girl, for the families were friendly, and he was often in Aignan, especially when there was a dance, or some fête. She had said good-by to him a year before —a brave figure of a youth she thought him then, with his *béret* set on his smooth, black hair at just the most rakish angle; with his red sash; his white, cord-soled shoes, bound with light green leather and tied on with white tape. He could afford to dress better than most of the young men, for was not his father mayor of Sabazan, a *propriétaire* as well, and rich? One must admit that he had been expelled from the Lycée, to the sorrow of his father, who had high ambitions for this, his only son; but then, Hector had explained to Paule that it was not his fault in the least!

But if Hector Dufour looked well a year ago, when he had gone away, how splendid he looked now, as he

swaggered about the Place in his spick-and-span blue uniform, with its silver buttons, its strips of red both sides of the collar, and the cap with "No. 230" above its visor, and the black belt, and the shiny, black puttees! He had a new, reckless, devil-may-care way about him now; but Paule did not notice that; she saw only how fine and manly he appeared. Nor did she notice that his pleased surprise at coming upon her there, selling her vegetables, was tempered with a certain condescension. No, although a little timid at his new grandeur, she was just frankly glad to see him and to renew an old acquaintance that brought back happy memories.

The very next day, Hector again came over to Aignan on his bicycle. Arrived at the village, he crossed the Place, went up the Street of the Church, then out the Road of the Madonna. As he passed Paule's house, he slowed up; but, not seeing her anywhere about, kept on to the high road of the Bethau.

Then he came back. As he approached La Chapelle, he caught sight of her, there in the garden, busied with a border of gay dahlias. He stopped and hailed her, and they talked a little while over the front hedge.

After that, there was scarcely a day when he did not go by, lingering there to chat when no one was about. Oh, he had learned much in the year away from home, this Hector! Military service, far from the parental roof, can teach a full-blooded and restive young man many things that are not precisely military. He was not the only one in his corps who prided himself that he knew how to handle women! It pleased him well to play with the heart of this girl. Then, as time

went on, it became more serious; he almost convinced himself that he was really in love with her. Even in the large city where he was stationed, was there a woman of his acquaintance as good-looking as she? Still, he was prudent enough to keep his casual visits to her garden secret. It was easy for him to see her without any one gossiping. La Chapelle was at the extreme edge of the village, and her father was out on the road all day long. He was always decorous and well-behaved. He never ventured into the house. . . . Several times, Paule told him that he must not come to her garden so often; the neighbors might talk. Already, to her great embarrassment, Sidonie, the seamstress, had made remarks, slyly congratulating her on such a "splendid match." But he ignored Paule's scruples and continued coming; and she was not wholly displeased, for he had hinted of marriage, somewhat vaguely, it is true; still, she was satisfied that his intentions were honorable. She was a little disturbed that he never came to see her when her father was at home; but he made the plausible excuse that they had supper late over in Sabazan, and that his mother liked him to stay home nights—which, oddly enough, was true.

One evening in the latter part of October, Paule started out, as she sometimes did, to meet her father coming home. He had mentioned that he would be working that day on the road that leads west from the village past Sabazan and on to Nogaro. How was Paule to know that, shortly after noon, he had been ordered to the road that runs south past the Château de Lasalle?

When she was well out of the village, where the road

turns and winds to the north, she discerned a lone bicyclist coming from the Sabazan way down the hill. A soft look came into her eyes, a look which had not been there until lately. When Hector came to where she was, he dismounted, surprised to find her here; but she explained her errand, and he turned back with her the way he had come, pushing his bicycle along beside him. She asked him if he had seen her father. He hesitated for a moment, and then said that he had seen a donkey and cart by the side of the road toward Sabazan, and that, no doubt, her father was somewhere near.

They loitered along, for it was yet early, since her father could not leave work until seven. Having time on their hands, they sat down for awhile on a grassy bank by the hedge and admired the gorgeous colors of the afterglow that suffused the soft clouds beyond the high-roofed church of Sabazan, over the hill. Once, his hand boldly stole over and seized hers; and, though she drew it away, the color surged to her face, and betrayed clearly enough her feeling for him. Then, as the reds and yellows slowly faded out the gates of the sky, they resumed their way.

It was twilight when they reached the little side road that branches northwest to Sabazan. Already it was seven o'clock. Paule was for stopping here to wait for her father, whom she had fully expected to find before this. But Hector persuaded her to walk up the hill, hinting that it was along here he had caught sight of Caillaux and her cart. . . . Still no trace of her father. The twilight deepened. Quite before she realized it, they had reached the outskirts of Sabazan, and stood in front of the great square house of Hector's

father, set in its spacious yard, and flanked by capacious barns. . . . It was getting chilly. She was lightly clad. A wind had sprung up. All solicitude, Hector urged her to go to the house with him for something to put about her shoulders. His mother had a shawl that always hung on a hook by the door. She could have that. She was pleased by his thoughtfulness; besides, she had never been in Hector's house since she was a child.

They entered the hallway. There were no lights. No sound came from any part of the house. Slowly and tenderly, Hector—he who knew so well how to handle women—put his arms about her and drew her to him, covering her face and neck with passionate kisses.

André's supper was late that night. He upbraided Paule when she appeared, long after he had arrived home. Then she explained how she had looked for him out the wrong road, and he forgave her, running his gaunt hands over her hair and touching his lips to her forehead.

The next day, that young gallant, Hector Dufour, suddenly left for his post. As the days and weeks passed by, no word came from him. Paule wrote once, but received no answer. Gradually she realized, with a hopelessness that became fear and a fear that became terror, that all his promises meant nothing. Her despair, increasing day by day, was pitiful; but no one saw it. She hid her condition from her father. Sometimes, she hoped against everything; Hector—he, whom she had known since childhood—could not be a monster like that! Once, indeed, André was awakened as she called out the name of her perfidious

lover in her sleep. It was an agonized and pleading cry. André listened, but heard nothing more. He idly wondered; then rolled over and went to sleep again. He must have been mistaken.

The time came when André noticed that all was not well with his daughter. She did not smile as she used to. She went about her tasks in a lifeless way. The color was leaving her face. Her eyes had a distressed look in them.

He feared for her. She was ill. He spoke of taking her to the little doctor; but she insisted so strenuously that she was all right—that nothing was the matter with her—that he kept putting it off.

Finally, he began to have vague suspicions, at the same time blaming himself for harboring them. It was impossible! At last, her condition could be concealed no longer. He could doubt no more. He guessed her secret. The moment she had dreaded with unspeakable terror came.

It was in the late spring. They had just finished supper, and she was occupied in taking the dishes from the table. Her step lagged more than usual. All through the meal, André had been looking at her in a way that frightened her. Afterwards, he did not go outside to smoke his pipe, as he usually did, but just sat there in the kitchen, watching her until she had completed her household duties. Then, when she came over by him and timidly touched his sleeve, he gruffly pushed her from him and ordered her to sit down. With ominous calmness he said:

"It is clear you are not well. When one is sick, one goes to the doctor. What do you say? Get ready!"

She mustered her courage. Then, suddenly, she broke down, sobbing:

"No! No! It is not necessary! I am not sick. . . ."

André leaned over, roughly pulled her hands from her face, and looked at her fiercely.

"Don't lie! You, with your innocent ways! When all the time you are no better than Minette Daste on the back street! . . . *Who is your lover? . . . Who?*"

"Oh!"

He arose and stood over her. He looked as if about to strike her. With difficulty, he controlled himself.

"I ask, who is your lover? . . . Ah! You won't tell. . . . You! . . . It is well your mother is dead! It would have killed her. You are not her daughter. You are not mine. Bawd! Harlot!"

"No, father! No! No!" It was a cry of agony.

He turned from her and limped up and down the room.

"You! But it is unbelievable! It is not as if you had a bad mother. Your mother was a saint! She brought you up . . . she slaved for you . . . and now you come to this! . . . Do you know what you have done?" He shook his fist in her face. "You might have married a decent man. I looked forward to that. It was the comfort of my old age. Listen! When Hector Dufour came home, do you know what they said? Well, they said that would be a good match. . . . But now! Do you know what they will call you? *'Fille perdue!' 'Prostituée!'* "

She could bear it no longer. Hector Dufour! Her father spoke of him as if he were a man among men. He! Slowly she got up from her chair to her feet and

looked at him. Defiantly she let the truth out in three words:

"It was he!"

He stopped abruptly in his pacing as if turned to stone. He could not have heard aright. Finally, he managed to ask:

"What did you say?"

But she had sunk to the floor and was sobbing piteously. He limped over to her, lifted her to her feet and half dragged her to a chair. Then, he, too, sat down. At last, he said:

"At least, you never lied to me. Don't lie now! Hector Dufour is an honorable man."

"He went away the next day without even telling me. He has never written since. I sent a letter to him. . . . He did not answer." Then, as if suddenly remorseful at having said so much in harm of the man she still loved, in spite of everything, she refused to say anything more, and, in her distraught condition, André could get nothing further from her that night.

The next day, André went out on the road to his work as usual. Often he paused and leaned on his sledgehammer and tried to think things out clearly. There was a tremendous struggle going on in his soul between his anger at his daughter and his love for her, which his anger could not kill. Hector Dufour! His old friend's son! . . . His mind went back to that night when he was awakened by her crying aloud in her sleep. He had forgotten about it until now; at the time, it was all so vague and unlikely that he had dismissed it utterly. But now, he knew. It was Hector's name she had called.

It was bad enough! But, perhaps, not so bad as it might be. There was this to be said: Hector Dufour's father was his friend—indeed, his best friend. Why, naturally, Dufour knew nothing about this evil thing his son had done! André's course was plain: he must walk over to Sabazan this very night and talk things over with Louis Dufour. Matters could be arranged yet, and his Paulette saved from scandal. His boyhood's playmate would not forsake him. As he worked through the long afternoon, impatient for the evening to come, he dwelt on those days when he and Louis had been inseparable—doing everything together—hunting frogs in all the streams round about, armed with long *arbalètes* which he, André, had made; wandering in the Forest of Aignan, gathering mushrooms and stringing them on stems of bracken; taking long walks to the fêtes in neighboring villages. True, they had not seen so much of each other in later years. Louis Dufour had steadily improved his worldly lot, while André had remained poor. But what of that? Emphatically, Louis was not the kind of man to allow harm to come to his old friend from the misdeeds of his son!

So, that evening, as soon as supper was over, André started out through the village and took the short cut to Sabazan. Such hope stirred in him by this time that he was almost gentle with Paule when he left the house.

Climbing the hill in the dark, he arrived, just as the moon was coming up, at the large, square mansion at the edge of the village, in front of which dimly loomed the mayor's sign on a pole. If it had been light enough, he would have noticed many new evidences of prosper-

ity since he had last been here. A long shed to the left of the huge yard sheltered more carts and wagons than ever before; and at the end was a recently built garage, in which was a brand new automobile.

There was a light in the house. Good! . . . The kitchen girl answered his knock. Yes, Monsieur Dufour was at home. She took him into the dining room where, under a hanging acetylene lamp, by the cleared table, Louis was reading the daily paper he took from Bordeaux.

His big bulk arose clumsily as André appeared in the doorway, and his hearty voice greeted him noisily:

"Ah! André! It is a long time! Well, well! Come inside, come inside and have a chair! Here! I am all alone, as you see. Madame Dufour, she is up at the village. She will be back soon. . . . Well, Well! I think of you many times, although I do not see you as often as I would like it! But one never forgets one's old friends—is it not so?"

So Dufour was alone. Excellent! They could have a quiet talk without interruption.

Still, it was not so easy for André, now that he was in the presence of his friend, to broach the matter that had brought him to Sabazan. In spite of the jovial welcome, he detected something of the patronizing in Dufour's manner, and felt as never before the chasm that life had gradually put between them. This man, rich, a *maire;* and he, a mender of roads! . . . Nevertheless, after a few preliminary remarks about everyday concerns, he took courage and began to tell, haltingly at first, of the disgrace that had come to him and his. As he went on, his speech became more rapid, and,

in spite of his desire to keep calm, kindled to righteous anger as he pronounced the name of Hector Dufour as the seducer of his daughter.

At the mention of his son, the last thing that Dufour had expected, he started up in his chair and looked at André incredulously. For a moment, he struggled between extreme indignation and pity. At last, he found speech, shaking his head sorrowfully:

"I sympathize with you, André, and I am sorry for Paule. But let me tell you: this calamity has turned your head! . . . Wait! . . . I am glad you came to me in your time of trouble. I ask only one thing: do not mention my son's name again. It has done no particular harm here, although it is bad enough. But don't be so foolish as to talk to anybody else that way. Why, people might actually think there was some truth in it! . . . As I say, I regret exceedingly that this misfortune has come to you. If there was only anything that could be done . . . that I could do . . ."

Monsieur Dufour arose heavily to his feet. To him, the distasteful interview was over. André also got up. But he made no move toward the door. He limped nearer to Dufour. It was hard for him to control himself. He must do so for Paule's sake, or all was lost.

"There is only one thing," he began, as quietly as he could. "It is the just thing. You were always a just man. Your son . . . well, . . . he must marry Paule! That is why I came. To arrange things quietly."

Dufour's face showed amazed exasperation. He was plainly angry, now:

"Impossible! . . . Besides, I tell you again that what you say about my son is utter nonsense! Why,

you know well enough that he has been away on his military service. He has not been home since . . ." Dufour's voice hesitated, died to silence. An uneasy suspicion had crossed his mind. Was it possible, after all? He did not wholly trust that son of his!

"I will remind you," said André, his voice rising. "He was home last October. He stayed a month. He was often over in Aignan. All that I say is absolutely true. It can be proved."

"Proved, you say? Proved? . . . How?"

"My daughter does not lie. She tried to shield him at first. I got the truth out of her!"

A sneer crept into Dufour's voice:

"So that is your proof! You would take a girl's word for a thing like that! It is clear that you know little about women! Oh, they are sly, sometimes! I don't blame your daughter for trying to turn her disgrace into an advantageous marriage. But . . ."

André lost control of himself:

"Ask your son! He can't deny it!"

Under the bright rays of the acetylene lamp, Dufour's face flamed angrily. There was not a trace of pity in it now:

"Oh, that is it, is it! But he will deny it! For the very good reason that it is a lie! And, Magnoac, you may as well know this!" He shook his fat forefinger in front of André. "Even if he admitted it to me, I would see that he denied it to others—do you hear me? I may as well tell you, Magnoac—on no account and for no reason whatever would I let my son marry beneath him like that! *Sacrédieu!* Just because a wayward young girl is foolish enough to abandon herself to a man is no

reason for him to marry her! Why, it is the best reason in the world for him not to marry her!" . . . Suddenly noticing the frenzied look in André's face, he became afraid and backed away a little and took a milder tone. "Listen to me! As I said, I am sorry for you. I have been patient and listened to all this nonsense because we were good friends once. But one can presume even on friendship. You have gone entirely too far, bringing my son's name into this disgraceful matter. It was natural for you to try to make the best of it, but . . ."

The whole world suddenly seemed to forsake André, and all reason with it. He advanced menacingly on Dufour, shaking his fist in his face. He was not himself any more. He was like a madman. Dufour quickly put the table between them, his hands gripping its edges.

"Scoundrel!" André shouted. "You and your precious son! You taunt me with how rich you are! Bah! I would rather you were honest! You talk of friendship! Nothing so vile ever came from a friend! You have stolen all I have! You talk of friendship. Hypocrite! You were never my friend! You make friendship a mockery! You are even baser than your wretched son! Beast! Understand this: I would not have my daughter soil herself by marrying your iniquitous son of a pig! The good God curse you and all your house! Oh!"

André's voice was almost a scream. Madame Dufour's panicky white face, contorted with fright for her husband, had appeared in the doorway a few moments before, but André paid no attention to her. When he had finished, he turned and lunged blindly past her, almost knocking her down; then through the hallway and out into the night, muttering terrible things as

he went. Once, halfway down the hill, he stopped and shook his clenched fist back at the house, and then resumed his way. As he neared Aignan, he limped along more slowly, his head bowed, his tears falling.

Paule was waiting up for him. She was terrified at his looks when he came in. He uttered no word of explanation, but harshly ordered her to bed.

The next day, and for days afterward, he hardly spoke to her. His manner was cold and he markedly avoided her. If she said anything, he would not listen. She was often conscious of his gaze upon her. Sometimes, he would abruptly leave the table, his supper hardly tasted, and go out. He would not return home until quite late. He was wandering out about the roads somewhere. Once, on the high hill of the Bethau, some one heard from the road laughter like that of a crazy man.

As the weeks passed, he became a little more sane. Like a sacred flame that could not die out, his old love for his daughter still lived in him. At rare times, he wondered if, after all, she had been so much at fault. A girl of her age ought to have had a mother's care. She had been in this house alone, day after day, with no one to counsel her, with no company except her pleasureless tasks. It was quite possible he should not have blamed her as much as he had.

As his faith in her began to revive a little, he showed small signs of the old affection. She noticed it with a fearful sort of gladness. One night, when he went so far as to give her a slight caress, she impulsively opened her heart to him and told him all—of how she had gone that evening to seek him on the road; how Hector Du-

four had met her and lied to her, saying he had seen the cart and donkey up toward Sabazan; how he had induced her to go into his house when his parents were away in Nogaro; his protestations of love for her. Old André listened, a new anger growing in his heart, not against her, now—more and more, it was pity for *her*, now. Things were different from what he had thought.

But still, he could not forgive her.

June came and went. Paule was seen no more on market days, selling her vegetables by the *mairie*. At last, she no longer left the house. At times, people passing by La Chapelle had a glimpse of her, pale, distraught, abstractedly going about her accustomed tasks, cleaning the flagstones by the door, or sweeping the hard clay of the yard, or watering her geraniums. Her father sullenly told his friends that Paule was not well.

People had long noticed the change in André, too. He seemed older, his big-boned frame more bent, his hair whiter.

Then, as was inevitable, someone put two and two together, and all at once the village gossips had plenty to talk about. Hector Dufour's name was mentioned, first cautiously, then more freely. He had been seen going out the Road of the Madonna too many times; some had even espied him talking with Paule in her garden. Oh, the affair was obvious! Some took one view and some another. Madame Lacoste, who had lived several years in Paris, was inclined to be lenient. But Sidonie, the seamstress, took sides against the girl. Old Marinette, who always differed from Sidonie, blamed Hector Dufour in her forceful, downright way.

But all the village was one in being sorry for André.

He resented their pity, which they could not help showing. He noticed that some avoided him. When he went to the village after his long day's work to buy supplies for the kitchen, he would sometimes come upon a group, who, when they saw him, would suddenly stop talking. He guessed that they had been conversing about him and his disgrace.

III

It was mid-afternoon of the first Sunday in August. The Road of the Madonna was at its best. In the plane trees, a vast chorus of cicadas rattled innumerable castanets, rising to a stridulous din, then dying to silence. Butterflies hovered along the hedges, and, in the little doctor's garden, the second crop of roses was in bloom. By the broken shutter on old Marinette's house, the last crimson hollyhocks flaunted themselves. Still farther on, the vine straggling over the tax-collector's door showed luscious bunches of the first ripe grapes.

Two women crossed the road and made for the Virgin's statue. They unwired the gate, entered within the palings, and began to clean diligently around the pedestal. One was robust and jovial looking; the other, short, thin, and sharp-featured. Old Marinette it was, and her neighbor, Sidonie, the seamstress. They were busy preparing the Virgin for the procession which takes place the first Sunday in every month.

When they had finished their cleaning, old Marinette proceeded to decorate all about the statue with flowers, while Sidonie went back to her house and brought forth an old, frayed cushion of dark red velvet, which she

placed on the ground in front. Then they put the finishing touches to the flowers, just as the bell of the church rang out for vespers.

Half an hour later, the Sunday quiet of the road was transfigured with unwonted life and sound. From the church, down toward the statue, leisurely moved a procession, chanting the Litany of the Holy Virgin. Nearer and nearer the sound came, until you could hear the words of the old Curé and the responses of the people:

Holy Mother of God,
Pray for us!
Holy Virgin of Virgins,
Pray for us!

Now you could see them quite plainly, led by the *suisse* with his knee trousers, white stockings, gold-braided frock coat, and gold-trimmed bicorn hat, holding in his right hand his staff topped with a silver ball. Then the cross, held on high by a choir boy, flanked by boys bearing tall tapers. Then the children; next, the older girls from the convent school; then the women; then the men, in the midst of whom walked the aged priest, with his head bent forward and a little to one side, one hand behind his back; and, last of all, Lignac, the lame blacksmith, who led the responses with his loud, tuneless voice:

Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God,
That we may be worthy of the promises of Christ!

They arrived at the statue. The priest detached himself from the procession and knelt—his rheumatism made it difficult—and recited a prayer to the Virgin. . . . He slowly arose. A hymn. The service was over.

As the procession returned up the road to the church, the breeze wafted back to the Madonna the Ave Maria —ever more faintly and fitfully it floated back: *"Hail, Mary . . . blessed art thou among women . . . fruit of thy womb . . . at the hour of our death."*

Now, it happened that later on this very Sunday in August, at twilight, indeed, the same two women met again in front of the Virgin's statue. Old Marinette was driving her cow home from the pasture, and Sidonie was carrying a jug of water from the village pump. Just as they met, the angelus began to sound—only, it was not the usual angelus; for, after the first group of notes, the bells began that slow and measured tolling which only occurs when some one is dead. Anybody could tell by the way the bells tolled that it was for a woman: two tolls of the small bell, followed by one of the big bell. If it had been for a man, it would have been the big bell that tolled twice, and if for a child, the little bell all by itself.

Sidonie set her jug on the side of the road, and Marinette's cow found its leisurely way through the open gate.

"The funeral is to-morrow." Sidonie's usually shrill voice is strangely subdued.

"Yes," Marinette responds in her deliberate way, "the mass, it is at ten o'clock."

Silence. Then Sidonie:

"It is a disgrace. Her poor father! It is a good thing

her baby died when it was born. It's a good thing she died, too."

"He should have married her."

"Not he! What did he care for her—her with her sly tricks!"

Silence again. The wind is stirring the leaves of the tall plane tree. At last, old Marinette assents reluctantly:

"Yes, it is better that she died."

"Michel, the carpenter, went to the house with the box this morning. He made it. They put her in it this afternoon. They did it right away because André told them to. 'Why wait?' he asked them. What an affliction for a father! Ah! He will not be mending roads tomorrow! . . . Poor André! Who stays with André tonight?"

"Matthieu and Berthe. They're the nearest. Lignac, I think he will stay with him, too. They are great friends, he and André."

"You were there when she died. You helped lay her out."

"I and Berthe. We together. Ah, the pretty thing, the pretty thing! Alas!"

Sidonie takes a step nearer. She lowers her voice almost to a whisper:

"Her father . . . André . . . he has been acting queer for a long time. Did you notice? He looked very strange this evening when I happened to pass. I spoke to him; but, old friends as we are, he turned away without a single word and went into the house."

"No wonder! Is it not enough to make any father

crazy? When we laid her out he stood there shaking his head. He kept saying, *'Ma petite! Ma pauvre petite!'* He was weeping."

"She was to blame. She brought this on herself and on him."

"No. Paule was a good girl. That Hector Dufour is a scoundrel!"

"Bah! A good girl! Her! I tell you, she led him on! I know the kind. I could have told you long ago. She, with her pretty face!"

"Yes," answers old Marinette slowly, "her face was beautiful. As beautiful as . . ." and Marinette awkwardly raises her big hand . . . does she mean to point toward the shadowy image of the Virgin there on her pedestal? What she says is scarcely audible; but it sounds like, "The Holy Mother forgive her!" as she turns heavily away toward her house across the road with a parting, *"Bonsoir!"* to the skinny seamstress, whom her big soul tries its best to like. "That gossip!" she mutters, as she enters the low door of her little dwelling.

That night, farther down the road, André sat alone in the bedroom where a few flickering candles revealed a long pine box supported on two kitchen chairs. On the box were several bouquets of roses and a wreath. Near by was a rude table, on which was a plate of holy water with a sprig of laurel in it for the sprinkling of the dead.

It was very late. André had sent away his neighbors, Matthieu and Berthe, who had come to sit with him, assuring them that there was no need to stay. He seemed so calm and self-possessed that Berthe, who

had spent a busy day helping with the thousand and one things that had to be done in the house of death, was glad enough to go home and to bed. After all, she and her husband were just across the road; and, besides, had not Lignac, the blacksmith, promised to drop in? She did not know that Lignac had already come and gone earlier in the evening.

So André was all alone. He preferred to be alone. When life has tumbled all about one in ruins, one doesn't care for chatter, no matter how well meant. A disgrace like this—what good is it to share it with people? Joy, yes. Sorrow, yes, when it is decent sorrow. But this! Sharing one's shame does not lessen it—it only becomes greater the more it spreads to one's friends. They are thinking about it as they look at you. They talk about something else, but silently taunt you with it, while all the time they are pretending to be sorry.

Yes, it was far better to be alone. Yet, in spite of André's quiet self-possession when he sent his neighbors away, he was acting rather strangely. During the day, some one watching him aimlessly wandering about the house and yard, with that lost look in his face, had said, "He is crazed with sorrow!"

Now he was sitting in the room with the candles, bent over, his head in his hands, his long fingers buried in his disheveled white hair. After awhile, he straightened himself. His bloodshot eyes traveled past the long box, then over the bed and beyond to the wall, where was pinned a card decorated with red roses and blue forget-me-nots about a Virgin. There was writing on it:

SOUVENIR
DE LA
PREMIÈRE COMMUNION
DE
PAULE MAGNOAC

She herself had pinned it there when she was a little girl, and it had remained there ever since. As he looked at it, long forgotten things came back to him. That morning in the depth of a blizzardy winter, when she was made to get up before daylight, and was sent to catechism in the fireless church, and came back in the dawn crying, because, she said, her breasts ached with the cold! She was ten years old, then. That other time, still further back, when he gave her the woolly white lamb he had bought for her from a traveling peddler. How delighted she was when she discovered that, when one bent its head forward, it made a noise!

He got up from his chair, limped through the kitchen, and opened the outside door. He stood for a moment out on the flagstones, under the stars. Looking down, he happened to notice his sledgehammer lying against the wall of the house, where he had left it last. He reached for it abstractedly, and started around the house toward the barn. As he went, sounds came from his lips—mechanically, he was humming a song he often sang out by the rock piles on the road:

Can jou eri petito loun la,
Can jou eri petito . . .
(When I was little, loun la,
When I was little,

They bade me watch the sheep
And the little lambs!)

Surely he was not quite himself!

He put the sledge hammer in its place, returned to the front of the house, and reëntered it. There was no light here in the kitchen, save what was cast from the candles in the room of death. On the corner of the shelf above the fireplace, was a small brass lamp. He took it down and lit it. He regarded it for a moment. Her own hands had cleaned it last, and polished it and filled its sponge with the gasoline that gave him his light now. Its flame brought to sight on the dingy wall a cheap enlargement of his dead wife. He took up the lamp, moved over to a far corner, opened the door of the *armoire* where the linen was kept, reached behind the neat pile of sheets on the top shelf, and, when his hand emerged, it clasped an oblong box of cardboard, tied around with a dirty string. He went back to the table and opened the box. It was half full of silver francs, with some bank-notes beneath—money he had thriftily saved for Paule's dowry. It had taken him a long time. The light glinted from the coins as his fingers moved among them. Each one had been carefully rubbed bright before being put away.

He sat there, thinking bitter thoughts. At this very moment, while she lay so still in the next room, people were saying unspeakable things about her, calling her names—vile names. Dufour, up in his great house—what did he care? He, too, was calling her names, just as he did that terrible night. What had he said? "A sly one! . . . a wayward girl! . . . an abandoned

woman!" . . . Even now, Dufour was laughing at him and her—his Paule! He sat there, forgetting the coins, his eyes fixed on space.

An hour later, the box of coins was still open on the kitchen table; but André was not there. He was in the bedroom, leaning over the rude casket, a hammer in his hand, with which he was prying open the lid. The flowers were scattered on the floor. When the last nail was out, he lifted off the top, leaned it against the side of the bed, turned back the shroud, and gazed at the quiet figure lying there, dressed all in white, her hands crossed over her breast, the face, once beautiful, now thin and pallid, yet glorified, spiritualized by suffering. . . . And she guilty of carnal sin! She, his Paulette, his baby, stamped with the likeness of the wife he had worshiped, an unclean woman, a harlot—O God! what names had he not called her! Wild remorse seized him. He cried aloud in his agony: "Holy Mother of Mercy!" . . . but his voice broke, and only his labored breathing could be heard as he stood there, his big frame swaying in the shadows.

He came to himself slowly. Again he had the courage to look at her face. How innocent it seemed! It almost smiled. Never a face purer than that! Had not people said it made them think of the face of the blessed Mother Most Chaste, on her pedestal up on the road? Mockery! Blasphemy! O Mother Without Stain! Mother Most Pure! Mother Undefiled! *Pray for us!*

Yet . . . never a face sweeter and purer than that which lay here—the face of an angel! His Paulette! He would not have it so! She, too, his Paulette, was without stain!—he defied the whole world to say aught

against her! His *petite!* She, too, was pure, chaste, undefiled! He looked wildly about. His great fists were clenched. All at once, he turned through the kitchen, out the door, and lunged, bareheaded, into the night, then up the Road of the Madonna toward the village.

He had not gone far when he retraced his steps to his own yard, and, with an air of exceeding cunning, took a path that cut across the fields and met a little lane that led up, by a roundabout way, to the road he had just left, at the point where the statue of the Virgin stands. The moon was hidden behind a cloud, but it was light enough to see her dim form rising there on her pedestal above the black of the high iron palings by the tall plane tree. He tried to climb the palings; but they were ten feet high, and were topped with sharp points. He looked about as if seeking something, went to the middle of the road, and looked up and down. A long ladder was leaning sideways against a gate-post in the tax-collector's yard, its end protruding a little. He took this, recrossed the road silently, gained the rear of the statue again, set the ladder up against the palings, slowly climbed to the top, and dropped down within the inclosure. He listened for a moment. Then he stealthily pulled the ladder over and used it to mount to the base of the pedestal, carefully keeping at the back of the Madonna so she should not see him. Then he reached up, up, toward the head of the Holy Virgin of Virgins, balancing himself precariously, using both hands, now stopping to listen, now resuming his strange labors, until at last he slowly and painfully descended, and went home the way he had come. When he entered the house, he closed the door carefully,

bolted it, and stood in the room with the candles once more, looking intently on the queenlike face that lay there. Then he drew something that glistened from under his coat, and, leaning over, placed it quickly in the box at the very head, rearranged the shroud, nailed on the lid, and put back the flowers from the floor. Then, exhausted, he threw himself on the bed without undressing. As he slept, his tired, thin face wore a look of peace it had not known for a long, long time.

A few hours later, while André still slept in the darkened room, where the candles had sputtered out long ago, the sun was pushing itself up over the hills beyond the high road of the Bethau. First of all it struck fire from the bulbous tower of the church in the center of the village, spread over the red-tiled roofs and white walls of the houses, then down into the valleys, smiling on vineyard after vineyard, and on fields browned with the heat of August, and dotted with neat stacks of hay. In the little doctor's garden, where the tall pine trees were murmuring in the breeze, the birds sang lustily. On the border of the path by the duck pond, the first pink anemones laughed in a sudden patch of gold. Straight along the Road of the Madonna the sun flashed its way, touching the chicory flowers that grew by its side into a delicate border of translucent blue. From the village one could hear the faint echoes of voices, the first plock-plock of wooden shoes, the creaking of the village pump, the rattle of a cart.

Still André slept on.

The two rude wooden shutters at the front of old Marinette's small house by the road had been swung

back long ago, and her son, Emile, had gone off to the fields. Just now Marinette was in the garden, gathering vegetables; for Monday is market day in Aignan, and of all the women who sold vegetables by the curb, old Marinette would be the first to get rid of her stock.

All at once the shrill voice of Sidonie came from the house next door, and she appeared, carrying by the scruff of the neck a big yellow cat which she threw none too gently into Marinette's yard, crying out that she, the good-for-nothing Minou, had been caught lapping at the vessel of milk she had set down by the fireplace.

"Bou Diou! She becomes a pest! Keep your cat at home, I say! Every day it's something! Yesterday . . ."

But, apparently, Marinette was not listening. When Minou came to her and rubbed her back against her ample skirts, she merely gave her a playful cuff on the head and a mild reproof, *"Gourmando!"*

As Sidonie flung herself out of the garden in anger, still scolding, she suddenly stopped. She stood absolutely motionless for a moment. She was looking up at the sun-bathed statue of the Virgin just across the way. Sidonie's mouth was open. Her beady eyes started from her head. At the abrupt silence of Sidonie's tongue, old Marinette turned her way, and then she, too, saw.

The crown—the crown of the Madonna . . . *it was gone!*

It couldn't be! Old Marinette lumbered out into the road by Sidonie and looked up, shading her eyes.

The Crown of the Queen of Saints had disappeared! The blessed head of the Holy Mother of God was bare!

Each tried to speak, but could say nothing. Sidonie made queer noises in her withered throat. Old Mari-

nette looked as if she were witnessing some wholly unbelievable miracle. The two women found themselves slowly crossing the road together. There stood the familiar mottled stone pedestal surrounded by its high iron palings, as always; there were the dainty hands upraised in prayer; there was the amiable face of the Mother of our Redeemer tilted to one side.

But her crown, it had utterly vanished! Mechanically, hardly knowing what she was doing, old Marinette stepped nearer and tried the little gate. It was secure on its wire, just as she herself had fastened it the day before. She looked inside. The white lilies that grew at the base were trampled upon, and a wreath had fallen and lay upon the grass.

Half an hour later, the whole village knew of it, and hardly any one but had expressed an opinion on the unprecedented event. A few said it was a miracle. But this, the little doctor, who was also the mayor, and an exceedingly practical man, dismissed with a derisive "Bo-bo-bo-bo-bo!" saying that quite clearly it was a theft, although he readily admitted that such a theft could have no reason in it at all. What could one do with the crown of the Madonna? Dumeste, the proprietor of the café, thought it over, and finally pronounced that it was quite likely a prank of some drunken boys from a neighboring village.

Rigot, the right hand man of the mayor, suggested that a reward be offered for its return. Fitte, the notary, pooh-poohed that, and said that no one would dare return it. No, however it had disappeared, it was gone for good.

At a little before ten o'clock, the bell tolled from the

church, and the funeral procession of Paule Magnoac slowly started up the Road of the Madonna from André's house, led by the choir boy carrying the cross, and then the priest. On a four-wheeled *corbillard,* painted black with white trimmings, the pine casket, draped with a pall and covered with flowers, was pushed along by the men. Far more people than one might expect followed in the procession, for, after all, Paule had always been a favorite, and the first condemnation of the village had gradually turned to pity. Old André himself, pale, haggard, limped along after the *corbillard,* with his eyes on the ground; as the procession passed by the statue of the Virgin, he did not look up. At the church, all through the mass he sat as in a dream, his hands twisting at the brim of his hat; and at the open grave in the cemetery, among the tall cedars, he stood, bareheaded, stony of countenance, watching his friends throw in their little handfuls of earth with that dry-eyed despair which expresses a deeper sorrow than mere tears can.

IV

Three months later, a little after dark, the Abbé Pierre Clément walked out the Road of the Madonna and stopped at André's house. The good Abbé, who taught philosophy in a seminary in far-off Paris, had come home to Aignan for a few days on account of the serious illness of his aged father, in whose house on the Street of the Church he himself was born. From of old, the Abbé had known André passing well; and his dead

wife, he had known her, too; and little Paulette—he remembered how, when he called, she would come timidly to him to look up into his face and to feel his hand stroking her hair.

There was no light in the house now. Nevertheless, after listening at the door a moment, the Abbé made bold to open it and call:

"André!"

There was the scraping of a chair, then the clatter of wooden shoes across the floor, and André's bent figure loomed in the doorway.

"*Bonsoir,* André! I was taking a walk . . ."

"Ah! . . . Monsieur l'Abbé! . . . It is you! *Entrez! Entrez!* . . . One moment . . . I will make a light. I was sitting here by myself . . ." and André reached to the corner of the shelf above the fireplace for the brass lamp, which, after several ineffectual attempts, he lighted and placed on the table.

The Abbé drew up a chair and sat down. He looked at André as the light fell on his face. How changed, he thought, since he had last seen him! But then, so much had happened—so much!—since he had last been here, early in the summer. His eyes were hollow, his cheeks sunken, the veins stood out in his hollow temples, and his hair was white as snow. A broken man. It was André who spoke first; and his words were of what was uppermost in the minds of both of them:

"She was all I had, Monsieur l'Abbé!"

The Abbé waited a moment. Then, slowly, "No. Not all. There is God, André."

"She was a good girl, Monsieur l'Abbé." The old man's thin voice spoke defiance.

But the Abbé only assented quietly, "Yes; she was a good girl."

"Often, Monsieur l'Abbé, she went to communion and vespers and to mass on Friday morning. Her mother taught her piety. She was not like the other girls of the village. It was her mother, not me."

"No girl ever had a better mother, André."

"Yet . . . will you believe it? . . . My Paulette! I have sometimes struck her. With these hands I have beat her. . . . She had a note from her teacher at the school, blaming her for her deportment. All the way home she prayed to the good God that He would change the words in the note. But every time she looked, the words were the same as before. Then she lost the note, and I would not believe her. I struck her. I slapped her on the face—she, who never lied to me or any one else!"

"We make mistakes, André. It is hard to see into the souls of little children."

"We were very poor. There was a little box of candy. It came from my cousin in Lupiac. Long after the candy was eaten up, she kept the box and sometimes opened it and smelled the paper inside. We were even poorer then than later. . . . *La pauvre petite!*"

"But you made her happy, André. You were a good father. You did your duty. That should comfort you."

"There were some big leaves that grew in the garden. Her grandmother planted them. She would blow them up and make frogs out of them. She called them 'frogs.' . . . But I am foolish. What I wish to say is that it was good of you to come. I was lonely here, sitting in the dark. I was thinking, thinking. Sometimes it is not

good to think. . . . You, who are always so busy . . . yet you come to see me."

"I am not too busy to see old friends," the Abbé smiled. "My father is better. My Aunt Madeleine is sitting with him now. She is a good nurse. I have a few days before I go back to Paris. I shall help the Abbé Castex with a little matter. He wishes to raise some money for a new crown. He is quite broken over it. He has had misfortunes: first the sacristy burned. Then, this. I told him to-day I would help him. A new crown will not cost very much. They are made in Tarbes."

After some hesitation, old André arose, took the lamp, walked over to the *armoire* where the linen was kept, and, reaching to the back of the top shelf, reappeared with a cardboard box tied securely with a string. He placed it on the table, undid it, and, turning it upside down, poured out a shining heap of francs and some blue bank notes.

A puzzled look came into the Abbé's face. He looked at André questioningly.

"It was for her dowry, Monsieur l'Abbé. For more than ten years I saved and saved. There are over eleven hundred francs. You see, Monsieur l'Abbé, it was for the time when she should marry."

André swept the money back into the box, closed it, tied the string back on it, and pushed it across the table.

"Take it, Monsieur l'Abbé. It will help to pay."

The Abbé recovered from his surprise, and straightway refused the gift. "But no! I did not come to you for money. . . . Besides, it is far too much. The whole cost would not be a quarter of that! It is only made of

iron and painted with gold paint. You may give a little if you wish it. There are others who can afford it. . . ."

"Take it, Monsieur l'Abbé! What is left over, it will be for the sacristy. . . . It was her dowry. It is not for me. It is not mine any more. I will not touch it. Take it!"

"Perhaps, after all, it is best to let the whole matter wait awhile. The crown may yet be found."

"They will never find it."

"It is very singular. They tell me there was a ladder found in the long grass back of the statue. The tax-collector says it was his. It was taken from the front of his house. They say the thief must have used it. . . ."

"A ladder?" André had arisen unsteadily to his feet. His mouth hung open. There was a look in his face which amazed the Abbé. What did it mean? André was all a-tremble. The ladder! Until now, he had utterly forgotten. He had left it there. In his distraught condition, he had carried it down the lane a little way, and then left it there in the grass.

"Still," resumed the Abbé quietly, "it must have been a long ladder, if the thief really used it. I have not seen it, of course. The statue is very high from the ground."

André had sat down again. He stared straight before him at the floor. He began to speak in a weary, lifeless tone, as if, though his body was here, he himself was far away:

"It might be done, Monsieur l'Abbé. The ladder . . . it was three or four meters long. One could rest it up against the palings and climb over. Then he could put it up against the pedestal, and, when he was up there, he could reach the crown. You see, he was at her back.

She could not see him, then. The crown has spikes under it that fit in little holes in the head. All he had to do was to lift it off. It was very simple. It might stick because of the rust."

With dawning horror, mingled with pity, Abbé Pierre looked at the man before him. His gaze was long and searching. At length he questioned:

"And then?"

André looked up as if he were not wholly aware of all he had been saying. He repeated the Abbé's question in a troubled way.

"Yes. I asked you what happened then."

There was a long silence.

"I looked at her lying there. . . . It was terrible! . . . They were already saying things about her . . . I looked at her as she lay there . . . her innocent face! . . . as sinless as . . . as an angel!"

Abbé Pierre reflected a long time. At last he got up. He stepped over and put his hand gently on André's shoulder. It was hard to put the question he had in mind.

"In the casket, André?"

"Yes, she was lying there in the casket . . . my little Paulette! She was a good girl, in spite of everything. You yourself, did you not say so? Yes, you said she was a good girl, Monsieur l'Abbé! . . . She was lying there. The light from the candles shone on her face. You should have seen her, Monsieur l'Abbé! As pure as . . . as the Holy Madonna!"

Abbé Pierre stood motionless for a full five minutes. The old man was huddled in his chair, his head bowed. The flame of the brass lamp slowly died down and sud-

denly went out, leaving the room in darkness, except for a dim square of moonlight that outlined the one window opening on the road. At last the Abbé spoke:

"Good night, André."

The old man did not answer.

The Abbé groped for the box on the table and, finding it, put it under his arm and opened the door. He stopped a moment and turned back.

"Good night, André."

"Good night, Monsieur l'Abbé," slowly answered the stricken voice from the darkness, as the Abbé closed the door behind him.

He made his way back up the road to the village. His lips moved:

"After all," he reflected, "she, our Holy Mother, is the Virgin Most Merciful, as well as the Mirror of Justice. She has many names. She is the Virgin Most Powerful; but she is also the Health of the Weak, the Comforter of the Afflicted, the Refuge of Sinners. The Queen of Heaven needs no crown. Her true crown is the unspeakable glory of her blessed Son and the perpetual adoration of countless hearts, healed by her infinite pity!"

III

THE ABBÉ RIVOIRE PAYS A DEBT

The following summer, Abbé Pierre retired to his native village of Aignan for good. For forty years he had taught in the ancient College of St. Thomas d'Aquin, near Paris. It was with unspeakable joy that he now came back to the cherished home of his boyhood to spend the remaining years of his life.

But, as the Abbé himself once remarked to his colleague, the Abbé Rivoire, the happiness of age is always melancholy; for it is not made of the future, which one's fancy constructs at will, but of the past, which can never more be altered. Still, there was one thing in the past he would not have altered for the world: his intimate friendship with this same Abbé Rivoire, long his fellow teacher in the College, but now prematurely old and wasting away at his sister's house, near Paris.

Thus it was that during the first months of his retirement, Abbé Pierre would often be found at a rude table in his garden house, writing long letters to help while away the tedious hours of his friend. Happenings of the village, little and big, he wrote about; yes, and such long thoughts as steal like soft shadows across the minds of those who walk in life's sunset.

As the summer wore on, however, the Abbé became less and less satisfied with retiring utterly from the ac-

tive service of the good God. "After all," he wrote to his friend, "I am not so old. Although I am sixty-five, I am not the least old. . . . When I came back to Aignan this time, I was very tired, and I thought it was time for me to rest. But now I begin to be anxious for some labor that is of service to God and my fellow creatures. And what better way to such service than to be curé in one of the villages near my native place—near enough, I am hoping, that I may come as often as I like to see my old father and the people and things that have ever been so close to my life that they are a part of me!"

So it was that, at length, the good Abbé addressed the Archbishop of Auch to inquire about a vacant parish. Toward the close of the summer, an answer came, bringing far better news than the Abbé had dared to expect. The parish of Sabazan—only two miles away—was to be vacant soon. Sabazan!—the tower of whose church the Abbé could see from his garden against the sunsets! Although he had been in the church many times, he walked up its hill one morning, once again to admire its high nave and the dim, rich light of its low, narrow windows, and the statue of Jeanne d'Arc in shining armor, near the door. As he wrote to the Abbé Rivoire, he was very happy; although farther on in the letter was a wistful half-note of regret: "There is only one parish I would rather have—I mention it only to you, my friend,—that of my own Aignan, here; but, alas! such a thing is too high for my hopes."

That autumn, while Abbé Pierre waited for his appointment, there occurred two events. The first greatly

saddened the parish of Aignan, although it had been expected for some time: the aged and infirm curé, the Abbé Castex, took to his bed with a sudden stroke, and that same night peacefully passed away, in the fullness of years. A week later, far away in the village of Baillon, north of Paris, occurred the second event that, at first sight, could have nothing to do with the first: the Archbishop of Auch, Monseigneur François de Jonquière, fresh from transacting official business in the capital, stopped his carriage in front of the small house of the Abbé Rivoire, and alighted slowly, leaning upon his cane.

Céline, the Abbé's sister, answered the knocker and ushered him into the modest salon on the right. Then, with some trepidation, she went to prepare her brother for his distinguished visitor. Soon she returned and guided him back along a narrow hall and through the kitchen into the sudden sunlight of a tiny court, with high walls, where, under a tree, her brother reclined in a wheelchair, propped up with pillows. When the Abbé caught sight of the friend of his boyhood, he greeted him with a quavering voice, which, nevertheless, retained something of its gentle sweetness:

"Alas, I cannot rise, Monseigneur! You will pardon me. . . . It is good of you to come!"

"My dear Rivoire! Good of me? Bah! Rather, say how good it is to see you again!" He bent over the invalid smilingly, held his wasted hand for a moment, and then sat down. "I received your letter. I should have come, anyway. Surely, you know by this time that whenever I am as near as Paris, I come to see you, if it is at all possible."

"I wanted to be sure. That is why I wrote. It is of some moment, what I wish to say to you, although you may blame me for taking your time."

"Not at all, not at all! Weren't we boys together? . . . and then" (his eyes twinkled) "the men of deeds have always served the men of thought. A famous scholar of the Faith, like you—well—a humble soldier of the Church, like myself, is always at his service!"

A faint smile parted the thin lips of the Abbé. "You jest! It is the same de Jonquière as of old. He does not change."

"Say, rather, the same François. The fact is, it is a long time since I jested, my dear Laurent. It is being with you. It cheers one's heart to see you!"

"I only wish it were so. I have lost the power of cheering anybody. . . . My days are numbered, François!"

"Well, so are the days of us all, for that matter. We're both getting old. I, myself—well, I find I tire easily. It isn't like when we hunted together as boys in the woods of St. Flour, is it? Nothing too much for us then! There weren't many in our day who could do the things we did! . . . But I mustn't weary you with too much talk."

For the Abbé Rivoire had started to cough. His sister immediately appeared, adjusted the pillows, and gave him some medicine from a bottle on the table by his chair. When she had retired and his coughing had subsided, the Abbé was silent for a few moments. Then:

"Perhaps I had better say what is in my mind. As you have just seen, I am not very strong. And I have something to tell you that means much to me—very

much—also, a great favor to ask of you. Perhaps too great a favor."

"Take your own time, my dear friend. And if I am able to serve you, all the better, all the better!"

"It is a long story; but I shall make it as brief as I can. It goes back to forty years ago—you will not be impatient? . . ."

"Alas, if I needed patience to listen to you—well—patience is the one virtue my office has bred in me! . . . Forty years ago! That's a long time!"

"I was studying for the priesthood. In the same *séminaire* there was a certain youth, about my age. His name was Pierre Clément. You know him. He did a deed that I shall never forget. It is about him I wish to speak."

"Clément. Clément. M-m! Is that the Abbé Pierre Clément that lives in Aignan? The one that lately retired from your College? . . . But, one moment! Are you not mistaken? He did not go to your *séminaire;* surely, he came to our school at Toulouse—just when I was finishing there. I knew him slightly, then . . ."

"That was before. Later, he was, just as I say, in the same school with me at Paris."

"Perhaps he did go to Paris.—Ah, I think I remember."

"As I say, it was at the *séminaire* at Paris. I was very poor. You can imagine—you, who have seen our farm—how my parents had to stint themselves to send me to Paris! But my mother was very ambitious for me. Very early, she had consecrated me to the Church. My father's faith in me was not so great. Indeed, I am sure he resented my sister's having to give up so

much for my sake. But my mother had her will. She thought I had a future. . . . You understand. It is a mother's way."

"The Church owes much to your excellent mother, Laurent."

"May she rest in peace! . . . But it was very hard for them there at home, to keep me in Paris. Then, there came a bad year, a very bad year for the crops. Where we once had francs, we now had sous. Well, the time came when my father could not send any money. It was the end for me. There was absolutely nothing for me to do but to abandon my career and go home. All was over."

"But, surely some one came to your aid! When the Church has a promising young man studying for orders . . ."

"Ah, but let me explain! . . . I was not in the least 'promising,' as you put it. The fact was, I was worse than mediocre. More than once I had been reprimanded for neglecting my work. Oh, you make a mistake if you think I was brilliant! . . . My mother was in despair. When I thought of her, I, too, became desperate. But only when I thought of her. I will tell you why; you will hardly believe me: the real reason why my studies did not prosper was that I had at last come to the conclusion that, after all, I was not meant for the Church! The very idea of being a priest and having the care of a parish had grown gradually distasteful. I was certain I did not have the talent for mingling with people in the way a curé is obliged to. I knew I should fail. . . . I said to myself that if I could only have gone on living with books—not the books they

gave me, but the books I liked—it would have been different. But to be the curé of a parish! No it did not appeal to me. . . . So, except for my mother, as I say, I was almost glad of the misfortune that made me leave the *séminaire* for good."

"You amaze me, Laurent! You amaze me beyond measure! You, who have done as much for the Church as any scholar of our generation! . . . But I am forgetting. You remained, after all—for which we must thank God!"

"It was the one crisis my eventless life has known. . . . But, attend: On the evening before the very day I was to say farewell to all my prospects, this Pierre Clément met me in the cloisters. We had been good friends, although he was a better student than I. He had just heard of my trouble. He told me I must not go. What would he do without me, whom he regarded as his best friend! . . . Then and there, he offered to advance me enough money so that I could stay. . . . Well, I took it. For my mother's sake more than anything else, I took it. I remained."

"He was generous, this Pierre Clément!"

"He was more than generous, François. . . . I did not find out the truth until long afterward. He was always reticent about his personal affairs. But, little by little, the truth came to light. He too was poor. The son of a barber down in a little village in Gascony! His parents by themselves could never have sent him to Paris. But he was ambitious; so he earned money in all the ways he could. Sometimes his aunt helped; but that was not enough. . . . In the *séminaire,* we had an old professor whose handwriting was almost illeg-

ible. Clément had been copying manuscripts for him. He wrote a bold, clear hand. I have seen his writing often. It is beautiful. He was in demand. He was relieved from other duties for this labor, because he was found worthy. Sometimes, he worked when the rest of us were in bed. When he met me in the cloisters that evening, he had just secured an advance from the old Abbé for whom he was copying, and had put it with his savings to make up the sum I needed."

"This is all very interesting, my dear friend; and this Clément deserves much praise for his unselfishness. . . . But you tire yourself. . . ."

"I have not yet come to the point, François. Hear me out. . . . Ah, Céline! Pardon us! . . . It is time for my medicine."

Céline, after taking the glass, moved her brother's chair a little more into the shade, and then went in. The Abbé resumed:

"Now. To finish. . . . What Pierre Clément did for me that time was as nothing compared with what he did afterward. He did a greater thing, a far greater thing than merely to loan me money, which, you might say, any one might do. He—this Pierre Clément—became the instrument of my spiritual and intellectual salvation. We began to know each other better. Gradually he did this: he discovered my talents for me—such poor talents as I had. He found there was one study—one solitary study—that was a perpetual delight to me; one study that I never neglected, and in which I stood ahead of all the rest. It was history.

"He encouraged me. He opened up before my vision the life of a scholar. He showed me that there were

other ways of serving our Holy Mother, the Church, besides being the curé of a parish, for which I was by nature so little fitted. Because of him, a new enthusiasm was kindled in me. I worked as never before, and even came to the point where I sometimes excelled Pierre himself in our studies. . . ."

The Abbé closed his eyes a moment. Talking so much had tired him. The Archbishop sat patiently waiting, thinking it best to let him rest—perhaps to sleep. But soon he resumed where he had left off, which showed that his mind had not wandered in the least:

"The next year, my father was able to help me again. But he could not pay what Pierre had loaned me. I myself could pay him only years afterwards, when, to our mutual joy, we were teachers in the same college. When, at last, I did pay him, he was past the time of needing it so much. Let me tell you: he had me send it to a poor couple near his native village, for the burial of their only daughter, whom he remembered as a playmate of childhood. He had me send it 'from a friend' in my own writing, so they would never know. I even remember the name—'Caussade'; not that it matters now."

Now, up to this point, the Archbishop had been listening closely. He was really interested in this chapter out of the life of his friend; also, he fancied that it did him good thus to unburden himself. No doubt one was very lonely here, sitting helpless in this tiny court day after day. . . . His heart filled with pity. But he thought that now, perhaps, it was time for him to go. His friend must not exhaust himself by talking longer.

So, reaching for his cane, and rising to his feet, he said, gently:

"All this has been very pleasant, Laurent. This Pierre Clément of yours must be a rare man. As I said, I knew him a little at our school in Toulouse, and I have kept in touch with him casually since, and have liked him. This you have been telling me raises him in my esteem more than I can say. I must make a point of knowing him better. . . . But, really, I must go now! Your sister will not forgive me if I stay too long."

"But first . . . forgive me, my friend, for reminding you that I had a favor to ask of you."

"Oh, surely, surely! I had entirely forgotten! It is I that am to be forgiven. For the moment, I was only thinking of you."

"I have not been resurrecting this story of the past idly. I must make you see how everything stands. It is this: all that I have done for the Church—all!—I owe to Pierre Clément! You say I have been a worthy servant of the Faith. I would not remind you of it, save for one thing: not one word of my books would have been written except for this same Pierre Clément. The Church owes it not to me, but to Pierre Clément—although, as reputations go, the world has served Laurent Rivoire more kindly. . . . Well—to come to the point—I know from his letters of his desire to serve God as the curé of some parish near his native place. Now, he writes me that you have mentioned Sabazan. He is happy over it. But, I happen to know that there is one thing that would make him still happier. The curé of Aignan has just died. . . . Why not Aignan? . . . No! No! Please do not think me presumptuous!

We talk as old friends. I only suggest. It is merely a suggestion."

The Archbishop suddenly drew himself up; then turned and walked up and down a few times the length of the court. Finally:

"This, I admit, is wholly unexpected, my friend. Let me tell you. There is one principle that has always moved me in the exercise of my episcopal authority: whatever is done must be done solely for the good of the Church—never because of mere personal preferences or favor. I cannot change that lifelong principle, now; no, much as I might be tempted to for your sake."

"I know, I know! Perhaps I should not have spoken. I was too presumptuous. It merely occurred to me, who know little about such matters, that the Abbé Pierre Clément might make a most excellent curé for Aignan."

"M-m! Possibly, possibly. You are convinced, I see. But it is my experience that it is rarely wise to appoint a priest as the curé of the parish in which he was born; especially if he be of humble parentage. The fact is that however blameless a man's life may have been, the people are likely to know him too well to accord him that respect which a priest of the Church must have, to maintain his position and authority. They knew him as a friend and neighbor long before he was their curé. It is hard—almost impossible—for them to look up to him later as their priest and confessor."

"Yes, yes. What you say I heartily agree with—in general. But I assure you that the man we are speaking

of is a most rare exception. I have heard that he has made himself beloved and revered by the whole parish. I am sure that if, as in the old days, the people had a part in selecting their curé, the parish of Aignan would choose none other than the Abbé Pierre Clément!"

"You speak strongly. . . . I say this: I will consider what you suggest. I can promise nothing. I must think of the welfare of the whole diocese. There are many complications. I must not be unjust. Yet, I will, at least, consider the matter."

"And if the appointment is made," sighed the Abbé to himself, "then I shall feel that I have, at last, paid a great debt!"

The subject was dismissed. In truth, the Abbé saw that it was unwise to say anything further. The Archbishop, with friendly leave-takings and a last word of cheer as he glanced back at the invalid under the tree, followed Céline out to where his carriage was waiting.

A whole month passed. One morning, the postman called at the house on the Street of the Church. Aunt Madeleine came to the door. She received from his tray a long envelope addressed to the Abbé Pierre Clément. When he came home at noon from his garden-house, he opened it. It contained an official looking document, with the seal of the episcopal authority at Auch. "Sabazan!" thought the Abbé, his fingers trembling. At last! But, no: to his amazement, it certified that the Archbishop, Monseigneur François de Jonquière, hereby appointed the Abbé Pierre Clément as the Curé of the parish of Aignan!

The first thing the Abbé did after pondering for awhile on the wonder of it, was to write the great news to his friend, the Abbé Rivoire:

"I can imagine," he wrote, "how these tidings will surprise you! With me, you will say, 'How strange are the dispensations of God!' Why, when I said good-by to you a few months ago, we both thought that I had gone into retirement for the rest of my days. And now! Suddenly, I find myself the curé of a goodly parish! And Aignan, of all places! It was always a dream of mine—a very faint-hearted and hopeless dream—do you remember? . . . Ah, you, who will share my joy as no one else can, *pray for me!*"

IV

FATE IS A BARBER

The house in which old Abbé Castex died and where Abbé Pierre would henceforth live as the curé of Aignan, fronts on what most people call, "the Back Street." One or two of its residents, like Madame Lacoste, put on airs and attempt to call it by its real name, the Rue de Bouillon; but people will not have it so. The Back Street it is, and the Back Street it will always be. What if a Duc de Bouillon did lord it over the village centuries ago? . . . Of course, if the street fronted the Place, it would not be the Back Street; but, observe: back and outside of where the walls once stood it circles round, back of the Place, until it ends at the Road of the Madonna, near the back of the church. People know the fitting name for a street like that!

Early on the morning after he had received his appointment from Auch, Abbé Pierre, having said mass, decided to walk around the Back Street before returning to his house for breakfast. You may be familiar with a street all your life; but when, all at once, you find that you are going to live on it, it takes on a very different aspect. The Abbé proceeded leisurely from the church down the Road of the Madonna, his head bowed, so that his wide-brimmed hat shielded his eyes from the sun. In a few moments he came to the rusty, iron cross which marks the place where the Back Street

begins—a large cross, surmounted by a crowing cock. The sun shone full on the crown of thorns wrought in the center of the cross, and on the implements of the crucifixion arranged about it: the hammer that drove the nails, the spear that pierced His side, the sponge of which they gave Him to drink, and the ladder on which they took Him down. Here at the cross, the Abbé turned; his eyes traveled along the Back Street, its houses huddled against each other, their weather-worn, plastered fronts glad with the morning. Then he made his way down the middle of the street, well aware that the narrow sidewalks of his village were intended not for pedestrians, but for pots of flowers, and benches, and piles of wood, and wheelbarrows, and the merchandise of the little shops—not to speak of the wooden shutters that swung out at just the right angle to hit one's head.

This morning, the Abbé walked more slowly than usual, noting everything along the familiar way as if it were something new. He passed the shop of the tailor, with the tall oleander in a tub by the wall; then the blacksmith's shop, by whose yawning doors leaned sundry cart-wheels and the débris of the trade; then the low house of the *sage-femme,* with its vine sprawling over the front; and then the *épicerie,* under whose awning he lingered a moment, absently regarding the display that had been in the window as long as he could remember: carafes, sugar-shakers, pepper-boxes, coffee-filters, wash-bowls and pitchers, vases of various colored glass. And then, coming to himself, he went on, and, after crossing a narrow alley, stopped in front of the house where the curé of Aignan had lived for nearly

half a century, and which was now to be his own home.

It was a commodious house, almost square, two stories high, and flush with the street. From the corner of it, by the alley, projected a street lamp. On the left was a low stable, where the Abbé Castex once kept a horse and cart. The house was better built than most of the houses here; the wide windows of the ground floor were slightly arched, and stone steps, flanked by iron balustrades, led up to the entrance. The Abbé noted with satisfaction that everything was in good repair, too. The tile roof was unbroken and did not sag anywhere, except over the stable; the shutters were intact and hung straight on their stout, iron hinges; the plaster had not cracked off the front, except a little by the alley corner; and, while the door looked somewhat dingy, particularly around the knocker, well, a little white paint would remedy that!

Before the Abbé turned away, he glanced at the windows of the upper floor, through which he had often seen the old curé pacing slowly up and down, his hand behind his back, his head bowed sideways. It was in that room up there that he had died. Every morning he had opened those shutters to the sun and looked over the hills eastward, toward the canton where he was born. Now the shutters were tightly closed. Behind them was only an empty room! A cousin from the country had come with an ox-team and had carried away the scanty furniture it contained: a bed, a wash stand, a writing table, a small shelf of books, and two chairs. Nothing but vacant darkness there now!

As the Abbé resumed his walk, he remembered how he had once remarked to the old curé that it was easier

for a priest to die, to pass into the next world, since his vows have made him already dead to this world with respect to most of the things that men prize. This started so absorbing a train of thought that he did not hear the greeting of Madame Lacoste as he passed her house, and he almost ran into a procession of geese at the turn of the street. He was aroused from his abstraction by the baker, who stood in his doorway, hairy of chest and stripped to the waist, and who called out such a hearty *"Bonjour, Monsieur l'Abbé!"* that all at once he remembered that he was on his way home to breakfast, and that Aunt Madeleine would scold him if he delayed longer.

For to-day, yes, and for many days to come, this admirable woman would have enough to do without calling *"A table!"* only to hear nothing but the echo of her own voice. This very morning the house on the Back Street was to be opened and aired and scrubbed and cleaned as it had never been cleaned before, and she must oversee it all. After this was done, there would be the moving and the getting of things in that precise order which was the breath of her life.

As a matter of fact, the actual moving turned out to be a fairly simple matter. No carts were needed: the Abbé's old house on the Street of the Church was almost back to back with his new home, and one could carry things across from one rear door to the other. So many of the neighbors were glad to help that they kept getting in each other's way with chairs, and tables, and beds, and bookcases, which latter would not go through the door until Michel, the carpenter, knocked them apart. The Abbé himself was not of much use

except in one thing, the removal of his precious books. These he would allow no one but himself to touch except Sarrade, the sabot-maker, whom he knew to be a careful man and whom he showed how to carry them and place them in neat piles on the middle of the floor in the back room upstairs, ready to be put in the book-cases by his own hands. He had chosen this room for his library because it was the most quiet room; and then, from the window he could catch a glimpse of the window of his old study across the alley, and of the dwarf pine tree at the corner of Madame Lacoste's garden, and, nearer still, the crannied walls of the ancient house where it was said the Count of Armagnac lived many centuries gone—and what food for dreams was there in those historic stones!

As for Aunt Madeleine, she was well satisfied. True, she would regret the village pump which she had always seen and heard from her front window, and miss the gossip that went on there morning, noon, and night; but her new room had this compensation: it looked out on the village scales, where wagons came to be weighed, and then on, down the new road that stretched from the Back Street into the country and brought many peasants to town on market days. The Abbé's father was the only one who was not quite reconciled to the new order of things. It was a real sorrow for him to leave the home in which he had lived so many years, inhabited as it was by the friendly ghosts of an old man's past. There, in the front room that had once been his *salon de coiffure,* his remaining cronies still came to exchange talk of days which few in the village could now recall.

On the evening of the day when everything had been finally moved, the Abbé, with his father and Aunt Madeleine, were discussing these very matters at supper. The Abbé's father was lamenting that henceforth he would not be so near his gardenhouse and its littered workbench, where he often pottered about, happy in handling his tools—although, as Aunt Madeleine immediately remarked, he had never accomplished anything with them, so far as she could see.

"You have Pierre with you now. The curé of the parish, too! That ought to console you for everything, Simon."

"Yes, yes!" assented the old man, querulously. "Still, there are my friends. . . . I shan't see them any more. Not so often. True, a *salon de coiffure* is no real use to me any longer. No use. Only, you know how it is. It has been a place for them to come. They will miss it. To think! Courrou will have it now. A harness-maker! Ah, how things change, how things change! . . ."

Aunt Madeleine helped the old man to more of the *fève* soup; then, with some asperity:

"To tell you the truth, I am glad you are through with that salon and have been for some time. Yes. It is not fitting that the father of the curé should cut people's hair! Besides, they can go to Boubée."

"I sometimes go there," quietly remarked the Abbé. "Although, considering my scant hair, I fear it is becoming more and more difficult for him to earn his fee."

Old Simon Clément was in the act of raising a spoon of soup to his mouth. His hand trembled. He set the spoon back in the dish, untouched.

"Boubée! Ha! There are no good barbers any more! This Boubée, now! What does he know about cutting hair? Nothing! Consider! See what happened to Raoul Fourcade that time!"

"He was ridiculous enough," assented Aunt Madeleine. "But no more ridiculous after Boubée got through with him than he was before."

The Abbé smiled. "There was a Fate—one of the famous three—called Atropos. The painter, Michel-Ange, represents her as severing with her shears the threads of life that Clotho spins."

"Well?" queried Aunt Madeleine, since the Abbé paused, lost in reflections.

"Well, in the case of our friend Raoul, one might almost say that Monsieur Boubée, who, like Atropos, works with shears, became the unwilling instrument of that inflexible goddess."

Back of this cryptic remark was a story which all Aignan knew well. It seriously affected the lives of two youths and a maid in a way that conclusively shows upon what insignificant things our destinies depend. But whether Monsieur Boubée's shears were as unwilling as the Abbé said—of that let the world judge when it knows the facts.

It all centered about the charming Élise Dumeste, who served drinks at her father's café fronting the Place. Some said that she was the prettiest girl in the canton; others criticized her beauty as being of too bold a type—although they applied "boldness" only to her physical charms, never to her character, which nobody found any reason to impugn, despite that a public café is not the ideal place for cherishing the virtues

of a pretty girl. Of course, her admirers were many; but woe to the young gallant who dared to presume upon the gracious smile she had for everybody, old and young alike! One glance from her flashing eyes put him exactly where he belonged.

Still, out of the score or so of youths who sought her favor, there were two with whom she seemed especially friendly. One was Georges Lagarde, whose father, one of the solid and respected men of the village, owned the merchandise store at the end of the Street of the Church, and whom she had known all her life. Georges was not particularly handsome; his nose was a trifle large, even for a Gascon, but it was set in a rugged face that bespoke homely good sense and practical efficiency. People liked him. Although straightforward and bold enough in the ordinary affairs of life, Georges was strangely timid before Élise; which, in itself, would have been enough to single him out from the rest of her admirers. But with the intuition of her sex, she knew that he really cared for her honestly and seriously. And she might have gladly changed his timidity into the happy boldness of the accepted suitor, had it not been for the constant and flattering attentions of a dashing youth by the name of Raoul Fourcade.

This Raoul, the son of a veterinary near Fromentas, had acquired ideas of life far beyond what one might expect. He was aware that he was notably superior to those young men of his age who had not enlarged their puny horizons by travel. He had been to Toulouse once; and once even to Bordeaux with his father; and, well, with such advantages, one insensibly becomes more or less of a cosmopolite and knows the ways of the world.

For a career, he aimed high: he wanted to become a hero of the arena, an *écarteur,* who, before admiring hosts, skillfully foils the mad charges of the wild cows in the *course landaise*—a spectacle that takes the place of the bull-fight in the towns of southern France.

Now, Élise was not at all unfamiliar with the swaggering gentlemen of the arena. Her own uncle had a *ganaderia* of cows of famed ancestry, and a troupe of *écarteurs* noted at fêtes the country around. Ordinarily, they failed to arouse in her more than a passing interest; but this Raoul was different. For one thing, he was very good-looking, and he carried himself with a distinguished abandon that appealed to her sense of romance. Often she would watch him admiringly as he sat in the café, the very picture of a man of the world, his long, shiny hair parted carefully in the middle, falling gracefully over his forehead and temples; his fingers ever playing with the upturned ends of his waxed mustache, not faint and shapeless like that of Georges, but thick and elegantly trimmed; while his prominent eyes, under high-arched, supercilious brows, rolled agreeably in the most approved fashion of the *boulevardier*—as seen by Raoul in front of the café on the Place de la Comédie at Bordeaux.

Now, if love affairs were settled by the logic of the gossips, the matchless Raoul was beyond doubt the one destined to win over his rival, Georges Lagarde. What better for a girl in whose family was the owner of a *ganaderia* than to marry a man who would bring future fame to the name of Dumeste? Yes, it was ideal.

Then when everything seemed settled, Fate intervened with even more than her usual capriciousness. As

Abbé Pierre remarked, Atropos cuts with shears; so did Marcel Boubée.

His barber shop was on the Place, on the north side, under the arcades, where the second stories of the ancient houses project out over the sidewalk and are precariously supported by time-battered wooden pillars. The smug, stocky figure of Monsieur Boubée could be seen any day, as he sat, comfortably tilted back in his chair by the door, looking out upon the life of the Place and waiting for customers. An affable man was Monsieur Boubée—one whom no one would think of passing without the interchange of a remark or two by the way, for he knew all that went on in the village and had the art of giving the gossip a witty turn which was often worth repeating, as if it were one's own. It seemed incredible, but, once upon a time, this hearty son of Gascony had been far across the Atlantic Ocean to Montreal, where he had stayed a month plying his shears in a shop on St. Antoine Street, and then had come back, convinced that America was not for him. The trip had taken every franc his father had left him, but he did not regret it. Indeed, it would furnish conversation for the rest of his life. He had also learned the word, "good-by," which he understood to be the equivalent of *"bonjour,"* and with which, with the air of an accomplished linguist, he would sometimes welcome his friends.

Monsieur Boubée's door commanded a sweep of the whole Place—from the town hall, diagonally across on the right, on around the rows of shops, to the village pump to the left, at the very end of the arcades. Most significant of all, nearly straight ahead of him

across the Place was the Café Dumeste, where Élise served; and if any one had been watchful enough, he would have noticed that the soft black eyes of Monsieur Boubée looked in that direction oftenest, especially when Élise appeared in the doorway and, for the moment, transfigured it into the gate of heaven.

Yes, he, Monsieur Boubée, was an ardent admirer of this Hébé across the Place; but no one, least of all she herself, was aware of this adoration. Nor, alas, would she ever know. He was well aware that roseate height was not for him: he was too old for her, being forty; and, besides—well—he was already married. But in the temple of a man's heart there is often a secret shrine, sacred to himself alone. Élise was his.

One morning when the sun was high, Raoul Fourcade, fresh from the smiling favor of his goddess, his *béret* set on his head at a jaunty angle, swaggered across the Place in the direction of the barber shop, twirling his mustache as he went. He had reason to be well satisfied with himself, for, pending her mother's consent to accompany them, Élise had just promised to go with him that very night to an event rare enough in Aignan: a grand moving picture entertainment in the covered poultry market. Even now, several people were scanning the poster in front of the town hall, headed, "Grand Séance Cinématographique," and announcing "The Veiled Princess," a drama *émouvant* in five parts, interpreted by the great Italian *artiste,* Dolores Casinelli.

Monsieur Boubée covertly watched the approach of Raoul with a frown on his usually smiling face. He did not care at all for this Fourcade, with his insolent ways.

With growing wretchedness of heart he had seen this worthless dandy gain the ascendancy in Élise's favor. As Raoul drew nearer, however, the frown quickly vanished, and it was with a smiling countenance that he arose from his chair by the door and greeted the youth with a cordial and hearty, "Good-by, Monsieur Fourcade!" and turned to hold open the door for him to enter. Then, rubbing obsequious hands, he begged Monsieur Fourcade to make known his desires . . . a shave, perhaps? . . . a little trimming of the hair? . . . maybe the mustache required attention? . . . whatever Monsieur wished, he, Marcel Boubée, of Gascony and Montreal, was here to accomplish it.

It seemed that Monsieur Fourcade was more than usually particular this morning. He stood at the mirror, regarding himself critically, turning this way and that, delicately fingering his mustache, lifting his long locks and shifting them to one side and the other to notice the effect.

Finally, he turned condescendingly to Monsieur Boubée. Yes, he wanted his hair trimmed. But it must be done most carefully. He had been thinking about it a great deal, and he was not sure what style set him off the best. A barber in Nogaro had recommended the way he wore it at present, as best suiting his face. Still, he had been afflicted with doubts.

But Monsieur Boubée had too often resolved such doubts with the happy resources of his profession. Such fine problems challenged a skill of which he was proud.

"Perhaps Monsieur will care to look at this picture on the wall. There are the various styles depicted. It came all the way from Bordeaux. See! There are six,

seven ways of wearing the hair! Choose! It shall be done as Monsieur prefers, exactly!"

But Monsieur was not merely particular this morning; he was finicky. He must look his best to-night. None of these graceful representations of the tonsorial art quite suited him. No, it was difficult, vexatious, to decide. His eye passed from one to another of the exampled *coiffures* with hesitation. He could not make up his mind.

While Monsieur Fourcade studied this placard, Monsieur Boubée regarded his objectionable customer with cold speculation. Gradually a crafty look, wholly unwonted, came into his eyes. Finally, he spoke. His voice was oilier than usual:

"It is as Monsieur no doubt has it in mind. One does not care to appear like all the rest. Monsieur is discriminating. Of a certainty, he says to himself, these pictures are for the many who are easily satisfied. An ordinary man looks, and he says, 'This!' or 'That!' without thinking with sufficiency. It is not for me to say. But since you appeal to me, it is for me to tell you. It is the distinctiveness which Monsieur naturally wishes to achieve—the subtle artistry that makes one stand out from the others. Well, when I was in that America, I learned many things. They, over there, how they laugh at our old-fashioned Gascon ways! It was there I learned how to cut the hair in the manner which is for us so different! How? Ah, very short—so! And the result? Perhaps you have never seen the Americans —so chic! So clever! No wonder the girls of our country adored them when they came on the ships to fight! What chance had we then, I ask you!"

The rivulet of Monsieur Fourcade's mind, though shallow, ran swiftly. The little barber's harangue impressed him. He thought of a certain American who had been visiting in these parts during the very summer just past. What a flutter he had created in the hearts of the young girls for miles around! Then this American—he had actually married and carried across the ocean the finest girl in the whole commune! . . .

Monsieur Fourcade's mind was made up. It was for him to be the first to copy the foreign style in hair. He took off his tie and celluloid collar, placed himself in the chair, and insolently commanded Monsieur Boubée to proceed.

A half hour later, Monsieur Fourçade's hair was extremely short. Long, black locks, oily with pomade, lay strewn all about the floor. In the mirror he beheld, first with apprehension, then with rising satisfaction, a shorn Gascon, who to his eyes looked even more chic and clever than any American that ever broke a French girl's heart. Only . . . was it possible that Monsieur Boubée had somewhat forgotten the art he had learned in St. Antoine Street, Montreal? Or had his shears slipped? The hair was shorter than even the most efficient of Americans customarily affect, and revealed every intimate contour of his round, low-browed, and not too shapely head.

Perhaps it had been well if Monsieur Fourcade had stopped here. But his eye wandered from his close-cropped head to his mustache, and then back again. It became increasingly clear that this way of dressing —or, shall one say, undressing?—the hair rendered a luxuriant mustache like his own too conspicuous by

contrast. Although the acme of perfection when he stepped into the shop, it was now too violent a note in the tonsorial landscape. Certainly, it must be subdued to be *en rapport* with the rest. He suggested as much to Monsieur Boubée, who hastened to agree.

"It is perhaps too much, as Monsieur says. But it is easily remedied. It shall be trimmed shorter, like the head. Then Monsieur shall see!"

The *coiffeur's* shears became busy.

"So! . . . and so! . . . and so! . . . Ah, it is better, is it not?" And the barber stepped back to assay his handiwork with the artist's eye, while Monsieur Fourcade regarded himself in the mirror. Somehow, he was not yet satisfied with the result. He said so.

Monsieur Boubée cocked his head on one side and then on the other, studying the product of his shears. Then he sighed audibly. Again, he had to agree with Monsieur; he more than agreed:

"It is quite true, as Monsieur has divined. Indeed—I do not suggest it—but in that America, where is the fashion of the so short *coiffure,* the young men most frequently have no hair on the face. You see, Monsieur, it is the way there. I do not recommend it. It is not our way, here. We Frenchmen, we like the hair on the face. So, . . . I regret it . . . there is nothing else that can be done. If I make Monsieur's mustache shorter, it will disappear altogether."

"The American who was here—he had no mustaches, is it not so?"

"Alas, he had none, Monsieur! How often he came here to this very shop! He was so happy to find a barber who understood the custom American! Ah, he was

very handsome, that Monsieur Ware! . . . Still, I would not advise . . ."

"Who asked your advice? You talk too much! I am the one to be suited. Do it as you did it for the American! I am the best judge. And be quick about it!" . . . In spite of his insolently assured tone, was it possible that Monsieur's hand trembled ever so little as he fingered the silky ends of the cherished adornment for the last time? Even the brave have been know to quail before plunging into irretrievable crises.

When Monsieur Fourcade emerged from the shop under the arcades, it was high noon. His *béret* was rakishly perched on what looked more like a melon than a head, and his weak and shapeless mouth emphasized the futile nakedness of his face. From the collar up, all the gallant dash was gone from him. What, under upturned mustachios had been a manly smile, was now the silliest of smirks.

A number of people were about, as he stepped into the sunlit glare of the Place. He was extremely self-conscious, and walked with more than his usual swagger. He passed in front of the grain store, because he saw that Colette, one of the pretty girls of the village, was standing there gossiping with her cousin, Yvonne. As he approached, they stopped their talking and gazed at him, at first with puzzled recognition, then with round-eyed amazement, and finally with smiles that broke into ill-controlled giggles. He bowed to them in what he conceived to be his most courtly manner, and resumed his way well satisfied. He had made a hit! Neither of the girls had ever smiled at him like that before!

He strode on by the village pump, where several girls he knew were gathered. He was lucky that they were there to notice! They, too, smiled and giggled and whispered among themselves excitedly. . . . What a success! But the great triumph was to come. He would walk past the café where Élise was, hoping she would be toward the front where she could get a clear view of him. There would be a number of his friends in there at this hour. Perhaps, too, that Georges Lagarde, his rival, would be among them. All the better! Yes, there he was, sitting at one of the tables, sipping his *apéritif*. And there—yes, there was Élise coming toward the door with a tray—how pretty she looked! . . . Ah, she had caught sight of him and had stopped where she was, unconscious of her tray, which was in danger of slipping from her hands. He smiled broadly and waved to her with graceful abandon, then sent her a killing glance, removing his *béret* so that she should have the full benefit of his new glory. He would have gone in, only she was so busy. For the moment, it was enough to give her this passing view of him. Later, she could admire him more intimately.

As he disappeared around the corner by the Bureau de Tabac, it was a good thing for his vanity that he did not hear the comments passed upon him, much less the laughter his appearance had aroused.

"Did you see it?"

"A head like that! If Monsieur Dumeste needs a new billiard ball to replace that cracked one . . ."

"Why substitute one cracked ball for another? . . ."

"It looks more like a *citrouille!*"

"Or a *courge!*"

"I hardly knew him. What a face! Why, with a *coiffe*, he'd be a woman!"

"I have it! Madame Sirac, the *sage-femme!* It is she! She has put on pants!"

And so on, *ad libitum.*

To all of which Élise listened with burning cheeks. It did not help to see her father guffawing with the rest—he who so rarely laughed.

Now, love can survive many things. It triumphs over failure, transfigures suffering, laughs at poverty, and even defies slander. But ridicule! That is different. If it survives ridicule, it is, indeed, immortal. Especially, a ridicule that bears on the wings of its laughter the truth of the gods. Sometimes, it is necessary for a man's soul to be shorn of the trappings of wealth for a woman to know it as it really is; in the case of Raoul, merely for the head and face to be shorn was amply sufficient! Besides, Élise had lately felt in her heart the unquiet voice of doubt. More than once her conscience had chided her for not remaining true to her old suitor, Georges, in spite of Raoul's blandishments. As the day wore on, common sense came to the support of conscience. The more she compared the two men, the more she marveled how she could ever have been caught by the false glamour of this swaggering dandy of a would-be *écarteur*. Dandy, indeed! She laughed scornfully as she thought of the absurd figure he had cut that very noon as he passed the café. She was a Gascon, and, therefore, practical. What had this Raoul to offer her, even if he really meant marriage? Nothing! As for his ambitions for the glory of the arena—she had seen enough of that life to know how precarious a future

it meant. . . . How different it was with Georges! His future as the successor of his father was assured; and his virtues, while homely, were of the rugged, dependable sort a sensible woman craves in her heart. Then this Raoul . . . she let her mind dwell on the little things she knew about him, but had tried to ignore: his free way with girls; his loose conversation; the questionable journal he took from Paris, with its pictures of women, which he brought to the café to show to his companions, and over which they laughed in an unpleasant way, while they ogled her. She had seen such men before. It was part of her business to serve drinks to them . . . but to marry! Pouf! A girl like herself knew enough to be careful!

That night, as it was getting dark, little streams of people—men, women, and children—could be seen making their way from all parts of the village to the Street of the Church and the covered poultry market to view the "Grand Séance Cinématographique" brought from Vic-Fezensac. Among them, one looked in vain for the swaggering Raoul and his beautiful Élise. He had gone to the café for her a little after eight o'clock, resplendent in a new hat from Auch; but, unaccountably, she was not there. He had sought out her father, who amazed him by saying that she had gone out for the evening. His amazement turned to indignation and then to anger. He demanded with whom she had gone and where, with such haughty insolence that Monsieur Dumeste because exceedingly incensed, and volubly ordered him from the place, not omitting to hurl after him sundry barbed epithets that seemed to refer to Monsieur Fourcade's personal appearance.

Long after the moving pictures had begun, Raoul Fourcade entered the poultry market alone. The benches were almost all taken; but he managed to find a seat at the back. The drama of "The Veiled Princess" was at its absorbing climax, and everybody sat watching the dimly flickering pictures with strained excitement. His eyes roamed over the audience in search of Élise; but the acetylene torches were too low to distinguish anybody beyond a few feet.

At last the seductive Dolores Casinelli expired tragically in the last thousand feet of film, and the lights were turned up for an intermission. Raoul looked around. Finally, by standing up, he saw her. Ah, miserable one! Faithless! Who was that sitting by her? He, with the heavy head of black hair, brushed in waves straight back from his forehead? See! Now he turns toward Élise, bestowing upon her a happy smile, whose brilliancy is accentuated by the manly curves of a mustache. *Sapristi!* It is his rival, Georges Lagarde!

Puzzled, wondering at the capriciousness of woman, he sank back onto his bench. The lights went down again. The phonograph ceased. The antics of the incomparable Charlot were thrown upon the sheet. It was the silent drama no longer. How the people shouted their delight as the delectable idol of the screen deftly squirted water from a siphon bottle into somebody's eye, or sprung his cane into the air and caught it! . . . But through it all, Raoul sat in a trance. Once, from habit, his fingers vaguely stroked his upper lip, only to be foiled by its vacant smoothness.

He saw them again when all was over and the people crowded out. Madame Dumeste—yes, and Madame

Lagarde, Georges' mother, was with them. He did not attempt to speak to them. He kept out of sight. When, at last, he gained the Place alone, he walked by the arcades, shook his cane at the barber shop of Monsieur Boubée, and disappeared into the night, whose blackness covers all shortcomings and makes all heads alike.

It is thus that Fate once played the rôle of barber in Aignan and was the occasion of the Abbé's remark at the supper table about the inflexible Atropos and her doomful shears. The Abbé's mild facetiousness had the effect he intended—that of diverting his father's rising choler at the mention of that pretender, Marcel Boubée.

It also reminded the good Abbé of something he must see to. That very evening, he strolled around to see Lignac, the blacksmith. They talked of various things, and it was only at parting that the Abbé said:

"We finished moving to-day. All but one thing. Will you see to that? They are fastened to the masonry in front of the old house—the two brass dishes on each side of the doorway to my father's former *salon de coiffure*. I think my father would like to keep these signs of his old profession. Courrou moves in to-morrow. Certainly, these *plats à barbe* are of no use to a harness-maker!"

V

DOWN PAST THE LAUNDRY POOL

One evening, when Abbé Pierre had finally cleared the floor of its tremendous litter of books, so that, at last, they were in their old order on the shelves, he stood back by the door and regarded them. Already they began to make this room in the new house look familiar and friendly. When he had been compelled to say a last good-by to his old home on the Street of the Church, a gentle melancholy had assailed him—but now these old friends of his seemed to look out at him from their places as if to say:

"There is no need at all to be sad. See! We are here to bear you company, as always! Though all else change, we change not!"

The Abbé moved toward the shelves and let his hand wander over the backs of his treasured tomes. He touched their worn bindings, now pulling out this book, now that, until he arrived at four volumes in blue leather. Their gold lettering announced the *Essays of Montaigne,* edited by Louandre. He took one of these out and turned its pages, trying to follow the print; but it was getting too dark to read easily, so he reluctantly put it back. He turned to another portion of the shelves where reposed his set of St. Thomas d'Aquin, over against the *Exposition of the Doctrines of the Catholic Church,* by M. Bossuet.

"It must be confessed that most of these books of mine are rather ancient," he mused. "I fear I do not keep entirely up to date in my reading. Our modern writers . . . they are clever enough . . . but they are too much in a hurry; they spend ink as a mill-wheel spends water. A good book has to grow up out of life as a tree grows up out of the earth; it *is* life, come to the glory of fruition; matured, like a tree, through summers and winters of sun, and wind, and rain; its roots firmly set in the ground, its top touching the sky."

The twilight deepened. After a while, Aunt Madeleine came up the stairs with a lighted lamp and found the Abbé walking up and down. She crossed the room and placed the lamp upon the table by the window. Then she stood regarding him, until he stopped and looked at her inquiringly.

"I forgot to tell you," she began. "Jean Caubet came to see you to-day. He says the rope of the big bell needs mending again. I told him I would mention it."

"He is probably right. The ropes have always needed mending as long as I can remember. I'll get Courrou to do it. . . . Did any one else come?"

"Only Lignac, to bring you those *plats à barbe*, which he took down this morning. That reminds me. Lignac, yes, and Courrou, too, asked if 'Monsieur l'Abbé' was in. I said, 'Who?' on purpose, but they were too stupid to see what I meant."

"What you meant? Well, what *did* you mean?" The Abbé looked puzzled. "It is quite evident who they wanted to see."

"The point is this, and I should think you would insist upon it: they ought to call you 'Monsieur le Curé,'

now, not 'Monsieur l'Abbé'! I believe in people doing what is fitting and proper. Above all, Pierre, I wish they would stop calling you 'l'Abbé Pierre' among themselves. It is much too familiar. It should be 'l'Abbé Clément,' at least!"

The Abbé smiled. "You may be right. That is, in a way. But, after all, they mean no disrespect. It is habit. For many years, I have been 'l'Abbé Pierre' to my friends, here. Yes, and I fear it is too late now for them to change."

"As you yourself are fond of saying, it is never too late to do right. And this is the time to get them accustomed to the way they should address you as the priest of the parish."

The Abbé's eyes looked at her with mild speculation. "As you say, my dear Aunt, it is I who am the priest of the parish—so, if I am satisfied with what they call me, there is really no complaint, is it not so?"

"*I* complain."

"Yes, it is true. Well, since you make a point of it, I must, perhaps, take it under consideration. Only, I might show you an old book I was dipping into only to-day. It says this: that while a woman has the right to be sovereign in the State, if she comes of legitimate succession, she is not, even then, sovereign in the family, where, the book goes on to maintain, man is master, just as St. Paul says."

Aunt Madeleine sniffed. The playful remark of the Abbé only served to aggravate her: "I don't care who runs the family, or the parish, either; but somebody has to furnish the common sense!"

The Abbé could not immediately think of a fitting

answer to that; and, anyway, Aunt Madeleine had retired at once, in good order, to the other room, to close the windows for the night.

It was concerning the affairs of the parish that the Abbé had been reflecting as he was pacing up and down the room in the twilight. After this skirmish with Aunt Madeleine, his mind recurred to these matters. He went into the hall, put on his hat, and started out on a walk he often took in the evening—down past the church to the cemetery gates.

The night was clear, and, looking up, the Abbé saw the stars venturing out into the fields of the sky. How quiet it was! One could hear the poplar trees whispering to each other by the side of the road. But the Abbé was still thinking of these, his people, who were henceforth to be his care. There was work and plenty of it before him! Certainly, the affairs of the spirit had been too long neglected here in this corner of the world! It was not anybody's fault, perhaps; the Abbé Castex had done his best; but the truth was that he had been infirm so long that everything had been allowed to run down. To-morrow, he reflected, he must see the mayor and persuade him to have the open space in front of the church cleared of grass and weeds. . . . Then, there was the sacristy. Ever since it burned, the Abbé Castex had tried hard to have it rebuilt; but nobody had paid the least attention to him. It must be seen to right away. . . . Then—it was a little thing—but the clock on the church tower: how long its hands had been arrested, as if time itself had stopped in this village, long since gone to sleep over the service of the good God!

It was so hard to get anything done in Aignan! People were too content with things as they were. It was that way with everything. The plaster was allowed to fall off the fronts of the houses without being repaired. Many of the roofs sagged. There was hardly a gate in the commune that hung straight. There were those bell-ropes that Caubet had been to see him about . . .

The Abbé stopped short. He began to blame himself. Why should his mind dwell on these things, as if they were important! It was the souls of these people with which he was concerned. What was the matter of a few weeds in front of their church, when even ranker weeds grew in their lives, making a wilderness of what should be God's garden? . . . They had wandered away—far too many of them—like willful children, from the teachings of their Mother, the Church. Even those who kneeled before her altar did so out of mere habit, leaving her sacred admonitions behind them at the door, wagging malicious tongues, ever ready to believe evil, indulging their vices as if the Church did not exist—giving license to passions that belied all true religion. "The nearer the church, the farther from God!" Sometimes that was true. During the war and since, it had become worse. It was bad enough that the village had lost over fifty of its best youths; but why should those that remained behind seem farther away from God than ever? Why, in this very commune, there was a woman who had borne two children to another than her husband, while he was away fighting for his home and country! Only this day he had heard of a man who had forced his wife to permit another woman to live in the

same house with them for awhile. . . . The seriousness of his new burdens suddenly oppressed his spirit, which, up to now, had found chiefly joy in the prospect. He stood still in the middle of the road. Just ahead of him, along its ridge of hills, the forest loomed black against the dim sky.

"God has placed with me a great responsibility!" he groaned. "But I will not sin against Him by allowing myself to despair. We are never alone—no, we priests who guard His flocks are never alone—except when our pride shuts us away from the Shepherd of us all!"

Customarily, when the Abbé took his walk at night, he stopped in front of the high iron gates set in the vine-tumbled walls of the cemetery, and then turned back. But to-night he had been so rapt in his musings that he had gone on down the road, past the covered pool where the women rinse their clothes, and then on, up the hill, as far as Michel Bruhac's lonely house, which was all dark. As he now turned and retraced his steps toward the village, his mood gradually took a less dejected turn.

"I must get a horse and cart. The people out in the country must not be permitted to think that their curé forgets them!"

When the Abbé at length reached the silent village and made his way around the dark walls of the church to his own street, he stopped and looked back at the familiar belfry on its rugged tower—the tower that anciently guarded the vanished walls, now bravely patterned against the stars.

"I looked up at it when I was a child; and others will see it long after I am asleep in its shadow. I must

think of it as a symbol of what God wants His priest to be: a tower of defense, pointing upward day and night, from the perils of this world to the heaven of His mercy!"

VI

THE BELL-RINGER OF AIGNAN

It was an hour before sunrise on a November morning. The door of the curé's house on the Back Street opened, and the Abbé Pierre Clément appeared. In his hand was a lantern in which flickered a candle. He stood there for a moment, breathing deeply of the cool, fresh air, while his eyes met the dim border of dawn over the ridge of the Bethau to the east. Presently, he descended the three worn stones that led to the street, and, passing under the lamp that jutted from the corner of the house, turned up the alley.

Along this narrow way the Abbé wound until he came to the Road of the Madonna; then on, to the back of the church. Here, he turned to the left, crossed an open place, tufted with short weeds, to the wide steps fronting the south portal, and entered.

Within, he had real use for his lantern, which flung ghostly shadows among the low-cut arches, and struck faint gleams from the glass chandelier suspended from the center of the nave. His footsteps echoed on the stone floor as he made his way to the nave's west end, and then to a far corner, where he opened a low door in the thick wall and entered the square room directly under the massive tower.

Here, save for the lantern, it was as black as his cassock. There were no windows—you could hardly

call them windows, those high, narrow slits cut into walls five feet thick!

He advanced toward the center of the room and set his lantern on the floor. Its vague light served to reveal the knotted ends of two huge ropes which hung down from the cavernous darkness above. He reached up and securely grasped one of these ropes with both hands and pulled it. There was a groaning and creaking sound, and then the vast scurrying of an army of echoes from far distances overhead—and, suddenly, the boom of the big bell in the tower high above rang forth with mighty reverberations which shivered down the thick walls to their very foundations. A number of times, rapidly, with even strokes, the big bell pealed out, alternating with a series of like strokes from the smaller bell, whose sound was not so pleasant, since it was cracked ever so little: Boom!—Boom!—Boom!—Boom! . . . ; Clang!—Clang!—Clang!—Clang! . . . ; until the *avancées* had carried their plangent message not only over the village, but far and wide across the hills and valleys to other villages, whose bells, in turn, came wafted faintly back on the morning breeze. Of those who heard these melodious sounds, some would be reminded that it was high time to get out of bed and begin the day's work; some others, that there was still chance for another nap before sunlight; and some—alas, how few!—that the church was calling the faithful to their devotions.

After the Abbé had finished ringing the bells, he took up his lantern, and, coming back into the body of the church, proceeded along the northern wall until he

came to the door of the sacristy, at the left of the chancel. He was walking slowly and talking to himself, shaking his head:

"It is ridiculous. It is not a priest's duty to ring the bells; nor is it fitting. I would discharge Jean Caubet and hire some one to take his place—only, who can I get? Even in a little parish like Sabazan, they manage it better. There, the bell-ringer sounds the *avancées,* as he ought to. As it is, I am obliged to come here every morning half an hour early, and then wait about until it is time for mass."

The Abbé unlocked the sacristy door and went in. It was a cheerless place since the fire had ravaged it. For the time, it had been mended with old boards. There were two chairs. The Abbé placed his lantern on one of them and then went to a wide chest by the wall and pulled out one of the long, flat drawers. From this he took some vestments and put them on. Then he drew up the other chair and sat down by the lantern. From the pocket of his cassock he produced a breviary. He turned over the leaves, and his lips moved; but his mind was still on the matter of the bells. He lowered the book from his eyes.

"I am told it has been this way for a long time. The bell-ringer does everything else; but he won't ring for early mass. 'The Abbé Castex always did that!' he says, as if that disposed of it! . . . Well, I shall talk with Jean Caubet again and see if matters cannot be properly arranged."

The Abbé resumed his breviary, nor did he let his attention wander from it again until he heard the steps of the choir boy, who had come to light up the church,

and would soon sound the bell three times for the beginning of mass.

Now, the bell-ringer of Aignan, Jean Caubet, was a little, bent, old man—he was at least seventy-five—with white hair. He was not a native of the village, but had come long ago from Bassoues, about twenty-five kilometers south, on the road to Montesquiou. His brother was a priest; and when the Archbishop sent him to Aignan to act as temporary curé, Jean had accompanied him. Afterwards, when the post of bell-ringer happened to be open, he was appointed. This was over half a century ago, when the little bell was not cracked as now—although, come to think of it, there was a crack in the big bell then, which, however, was finally recast and made as good as new.

Jean Caubet lived quite alone in a little blind alley back of the *mairie,* where he had a locksmith shop. It cannot be said that he was at all proficient at his trade. Not only was he clumsy in everything he did; but if one had a lock that needed fixing, one had to wait weeks or months for him to come around and look at it. And even then! There was that time early in the summer when the little doctor sent for him to mend the lock to the door of the red room in the big house on the Road of the Madonna; he finally came in October; but what did he accomplish? He pulled everything to pieces, unscrewed all the hardware, and took it away with him, and to this day had never returned.

It was he who was intrusted with the ringing of the bells; and if one thinks that is nothing to do, he had better think twice! The life of a *sonneur de cloches* is far more arduous than some might suppose. There is

the angelus, to be rung three times a day, summer and winter round; there is the mass, which has its *avancées* and then its three blows at the beginning, and its sanctus in the middle; there are the vespers on Sundays and holy days; there are the marriages and funerals and christenings—when one has to climb all the way up to the dizzy height of the belfry itself and tap the little bell with a rock; there are the fêtes, when the bell is rung by order of the mayor; there is the dread tocsin, with its harsh, rapid staccato, that spreads its alarm far and wide in case of fire or war; and then, most dread of all, there are the times when the thunder rolls and crashes and one has to mount up to the bells in the midst of the storm and turn them over and over in swift flight, *à la volée,* against the fearful destruction of lightning, and hail which threatens the vineyards, bringing to naught in one hour the labor of years! No, the Pope that introduced bells into the churches thirteen centuries ago bequeathed no easy task to Jean Caubet!

Nevertheless, the people of the village did not like him. They would have told you the reason, too: he was entirely too grasping and penurious. If there was a marriage, or a christening, or a funeral—occasions when the family was supposed to pay the bell-ringer, not the priest—he insisted upon more than people could afford, more than it was right for him to charge. It was becoming unbearable. Why lately, when he came around to the houses collecting pay for ringing against hail, he had not been content with potatoes, or onions, or such other produce as they chose to present him, as had always been the custom; but he actually de-

manded that they pay him in money! And the worst of it was that they dare not refuse, since the ringing was necessary. Many recalled that he had absolutely declined to ring when the Pope died, because the priest would not pay him extra for it—so that the old Abbé Castex had to go and do it himself!

Some of his neighbors said that Jean Caubet had not always been hard and merciless like that. They alleged that it all began after Agnès, his wife, died. Certain it was that he had never been anything but kind to her. He was proud of her, and especially proud of her voice, which was sometimes heard in church and at entertainments at the convent school. When Agnès became old and her voice was broken, she still insisted upon singing the responses at funerals. There were malicious tongues which used to say that it was a good thing the dead could not hear—that her voice had become like a man's, "throaty and terrible," or like the big bell that time when it was so badly cracked.

A few days after the Abbé had determined to see Jean Caubet, he happened to meet him crossing the Place, at noon, just after the ringing of the angelus. The Abbé drew the old man under the arcades in front of the town hall.

"You do your duties well, Jean," the Abbé began, in his kindly way, "in the main. But I must remind you that you still neglect to ring the *avancées* for early mass."

"Ah, but Monsieur l'Abbé, the Abbé Castex always did that! And, well . . ." A crafty look came into Jean's face as he gazed down at his *béret*, which he had removed and was fumbling in his hands.

"You mentioned that before. But it won't do. It won't do at all! The fact is, I have found out that for years you did it, as was your business; and then, I am told, you suddenly stopped."

"Yes, it is true, Monsieur l'Abbé; but . . ."

"Why?"

A note of defiance crept into Jean Caubet's voice: "Well, if you will have it, Monsieur l'Abbé, it is this: the Abbé Castex would not pay me enough. As you know, one cannot work for nothing. . . . I had to tell him that."

The Abbé grew stern.

"You surprise me, Jean! I want to be just with you. But, on looking into the matter, I find that I already pay you as much as they pay the bell-ringers at Plaisance, or Nogaro, or Riscle. . . . And all of them are larger parishes than this."

"But I do not ask for much, Monsieur l'Abbé! It is so little, as I told the Abbé Castex. Why, see! For only fifty francs more a year, as I told him, I will ring the *avancées* every morning! And it means an extra trip, too. I am getting old, Monsieur l'Abbé! One must provide for one's old age. . . ."

The Abbé looked at the little, bent old man, and compassion stole into his heart. He spoke more gently:

"As you say, Jean, it is not so very much. I suppose I could manage to pay you; but, after all, a man of your age should do less, not more. Perhaps I can get the choir boy . . ."

But Jean Caubet was all eagerness now, perceiving that the Abbé was willing to pay.

"I shall be glad to do it, Monsieur l'Abbé! For the little sum of fifty francs, I shall see to it. You shall have no cause to complain. After all, I have to go to the church every morning to ring the angelus, in any event. I can easily wait and see to the *avancées* too . . ."

"Does it not occur to you, Jean, that at any time you could have done that? For the Abbé Castex, as well as for me?"

"It is different with you than with the Abbé Castex."

"I do not like to think it, but I fear very much that the difference is that fifty francs you have been speaking of. Ah, Jean, beware of the sin of avarice! Let me tell you now that I have heard many complaints. Remember this: avarice is one of the seven deadly sins. It becomes a mortal sin not merely when one breaks the law for the sake of gain, but when it leads one to prefer the goods of this world to the love that belongs to God."

The Abbé started to move away; but the old man caught up with him and touched him on the arm and asked, querulously:

"Then it is settled, Monsieur l'Abbé? I am to ring the *avancées* after this?"

The Abbé turned and looked at him sorrowfully. "Remember, my friend, what I have just been saying to you. . . . As for the rest . . . yes, we will call it settled, for now."

Jean Caubet went home well pleased. The Abbé crossed the Place toward the Back Street, saying to himself, "I fear that I am greatly to blame in this matter, through a lamentable weakness of mine. One

may sin in excess of charity as well as in excess of avarice. And in this case, the first sin has actually ministered to the second! . . . It is clear that a priest needs a certain hardness of heart in the affairs of the world, which, alas! I do not possess."

That very day, at sunset, after he had rung the angelus, Jean Caubet took it into his head to climb up to the bells. He took from his pocket a huge key and unlocked the door which led to the circular tower, in which there was just room for the narrow stone steps winding round and round to the belfry. The steps were very worn, and he had to keep carefully to their wider surface by the wall, or be in danger of slipping. And even then, the climb was difficult, since there were steps that were almost wholly worn away. As he labored up and up, clinging as best as he could to the masonry, his breath came in ever shorter gasps, and several times he stopped and put his hand to his heart. Mechanically, he counted the steps as he went—there were 118 of them —one had to feel for them cautiously with one's feet, it was so very dark in the long interval between one narrow slit of window and another. Where their dim light struck the walls, it revealed the delicate tracery of the moss upon them. Now and then he tripped on a step and almost fell; and the noise echoed through the crevices into the larger spaces of the bigger tower, alarming into scurrying flight the owls, and swallows, and martins that had their nests there.

After a long while, it became less dark. Light trickled down from above; the stone steps came to an end at the foot of a rickety wooden staircase; and, mounting this, he stood at last on the dilapidated floor of the

belfry, with its seven sides and seven windows protected by shutters, through whose wide slats the sky gleamed.

He leaned against one of the windows and looked out. A brilliant afterglow was in the sky, and one could see a long distance, starting from the huddled roofs just below, out across field after field, valley after valley, now desolate of verdure, with poplar-lined roads winding up hills crowned with the spires of other churches, until his sight was lost in the soft gray of the rim of the world. He moved over to another window, and there, far beneath, bathed in a sea of orange light, was the village cemetery, with its tall cypress trees, and, in the midst of it, the life-size image of the Redeemer on His cross. Beyond one of those trees, over in the corner, was the grave of Agnès, his wife, marked with a cross of wood.

But he had come up here for quite another purpose than to look at the scenery. Slowly he turned away from the window to where, in the center of the *clocher*, under a huge framework of timbers, were suspended the two bells. They were breast-high to a man, and their worn ropes, spliced and remended, hung downward through the aperture in the floor into the vast well of darkness beneath.

To Jean Caubet, who had rung these same bells for half a century—well, they had become a part of his very life; they were, indeed, the only things left on earth that linked him with the past—with his youth and those long, happy years with Agnès. They were, too, the only things remaining for which he had any affection. He loved the bells. Sometimes, he came up

here just to be with them. They were his friends. Sometimes, he even talked to them. They had become as persons; and why not? They had their own names, as persons have—the big bell was named St. Anne, and the little one, St. John-the-Baptist; they had both been solemnly christened with these names over a hundred years before, dressed for the occasion with precious lace, decorated with flowers, and surrounded with candles, while the Bishop prayed, and then sprinkled them with water and anointed them with holy oil, in the presence of their godfathers and godmothers.

The old man put his hand out and touched the big bell. His fingers moved gently over its surface and encountered some raised letters. He knew what these Latin words said—his brother, the priest, had told him when he was a young man, and he had never forgotten:

I, with a clear voice, gather together
the people for the praise of the true
God. I put the tempests to flight.

He went over to the little bell. For some reason, he examined it more carefully than the other. He looked at the emblem of the cross on it, but especially at the crack, just visible, running through it. Up and down the crack he ran his fingers, slowly and carefully. Then he bent over and reached up inside, just under the crack, running his hand along the worn place where the clapper struck. . . . No, the crack could not be felt there.

He raised himself, moved around the bell, and bent his face close to the inscription on the other side. It

informed one that this bell had been given the name of John-the-Baptist after its godfather, "M. Jean-Bte de Verges de Lassale, ancien officier d'infanterie." Jean Caubet lingered over this inscription as if something about it troubled him. He spelled it out, letter by letter, over and over again. At last he said, aloud:

"The crack is getting worse. They'll need a new bell soon. . . . And 'Sainte Agnès' . . . it surely is just as good for a name as St. John-the-Baptist!"

The following winter was a hard one in this part of Gascony—cold, with plenty of snow. By St. Luce's day, the wind whistled and howled, and Father Christmas plucked his geese with a vengeance. The church tower was mottled with driven snow that clung in patches to the gillyflowers that grew up the walls. The tile roofs of the village were no longer red, but white, and smoke ascended from the chimneys all day long. Across the street from Marinette's house, the Madonna had put on a fresh robe of white, and her new crown was filled to the brim with snow. The roads were frozen hard, and the clop-clop of the wooden shoes echoed far. The road to the forest was almost impassable. The oxen plodded along with furry sheepskins over their heads. Men saw more of their wives, since there was nothing to do in the fields. Some of them joined the organized hunts for wild boars in the forest; against the front of a peasant's house near Mauser, one saw a boar's skin hung up in the sun. Although his shop was on the sunny side of the Place, Boubée, the barber, no longer sat outside by the door, waiting for customers, but looked disconsolately out his window on a Place more deserted than usual. Across, at the Café Dumeste, the benches

out on the *terrasse* were empty, although there was plenty of life inside, and the merry click of the billiard balls could be heard when the door opened for a newcomer. As the winter wore on, the little doctor became busier, and the bell tolled oftener for the dead.

The Abbé Pierre Clément no longer went to his garden house to read and meditate; he had moved all his books up to his study and spent long hours in that peaceful place, which a small porcelain stove kept warm and cozy. He had at last purchased a horse and cart, and, in spite of the weather, made trips into the country to see his parishioners, especially such as were sick. Sometimes he would not get home until late at night; but Aunt Madeleine would have his bed nice and warm for him, having put under the sheets the long, wooden frame with the pan of coals suspended in the middle. And how careful she was to keep cinders sprinkled on the icy steps so that he would not slip!

It was an especially difficult winter for Jean Caubet, the bell-ringer. Think of getting up on a bitterly cold morning three hours before sunrise and going across the Place and up the Street of the Church to ring the angelus! Before venturing out, he would warm his wooden shoes by putting in them ashes raked from the fireplace; and then, emptying the ashes out, he stuffed them with straw. Then through the darkness to the church, at whose portal he stopped to knock the clotted snow from them, plock-plock, one after the other, against the stone steps.

It was he himself, instead of the Abbé, who now regularly rang the *avancées* for early mass. When one listened, it was plain that the crack in the little bell

was not getting any better; on the clear, frosty air, its flat dissonance was even more pronounced than ever. Few came to mass these early mornings. There were times when the bells were rung in vain—not even Madame Lacoste came—and the only one to appear besides the Abbé was the choir boy. For it was cold, cold in the church—there was no way of heating it—and as Marthe, the little doctor's wife said, the days of the martyrs were over.

That remark about avarice which the Abbé had made to the bell-ringer had apparently made little impression. He became more extortionate than ever in his demands upon those requiring his services for funerals, marriages, and christenings. Many more complaints came to the priest, who expostulated with Jean to no avail. Part of his merciless greed might have been the accompaniment of the natural peevishness of old age. And this winter, he was showing his age more than ever before. When he had to climb the tower to ring *volées* for a wedding, or to tap the little bell for a baptism, he was obliged to stop and rest more frequently; and he came down the narrow steps with much difficulty. He did odd things, too. For instance, as it neared spring, it became a mania of his to visit the bell-ringers of the neighboring parishes and get permission to go up to their *clochers* and examine the bells. When the Abbé had an errand that took him to Margouet, or Castelnavet, or Averon, the bell-ringer begged to be taken in his cart; at other times he walked, as when he visited the bells at Sabazan, and Fromentas, and Lartigue. Twice he walked to Lartigue, and climbed its heavy square tower, built like a fortress, wider at

the bottom than at the top, and studied its bells. Once, after one of these trips, he was seen to go to Fitte, the notary, with whom he stayed for more than an hour. People wondered what poor old Jean Caubet could have to do with Fitte, the notary!

At length, the long winter was broken, and tardy spring came, covering the hills again with the glory of its verdure. The long ranks of the Pyrenees, fifty miles away, were seen more often. The pond in the little doctor's garden was no longer frozen over, and the ducks swam there, quacking their joy. Birds sang in the trees along the Road of the Madonna. Once more, women tended the cattle in the fields, busily plying their knitting. André, the road-mender, found more than usual to do to repair the ravages of the frost and rain. At last, April came, and the week of the Passion of our Lord.

Now, as everybody knows, it is in the week before Easter that the bells don their baptismal dresses and fly to Rome, with all the other bells of Christendom, to be blessed by the Pope. Early Thursday morning they start on their journey, and from that time on, the belfry is silent. While the bells are away, the choir boys announce the services at the church by going about the village rattling the *crécelles*—instruments of wood, with a sort of cog-wheel at the end of a handle, against whose rough teeth a pliable stick makes a harsh concatenation of sounds as one twirls it about. But the bells are well aware that they must return without fail by Saturday to ring the big *volées* for the eleven o'clock mass. And the children know this, too, and eagerly watch for the bells, hoping to see them coming back home.

This year, although, alas, no one saw them, the bells returned safe from their long flight a full hour before mass. Loudly and joyfully they started to ring out the *volées,* and everybody exclaimed, "The bells have come back!" Over and over they turned, in an ecstasy of delight to be back home in the service of the good God!—and then, just as they had only fairly begun their joyful booming and clanging, their flight suddenly lagged, their sounds weakened and died away, and the village was stunned by absolute silence.

People conversing in the Place stopped and looked at each other. Those around the village pump turned and gazed up the street toward the church. Others came to their doors, as did Sidonie, who immediately rushed over to Marinette's to see if she had noticed the unprecedented event. Those already on the way to mass arrested their steps and looked up at the silent belfry, bright with the morning sun. Abbé Pierre, who was in his study, went to his window and opened it and gazed up over the roof of the Count d'Armagnac's house at the tower, Aunt Madeleine hastened up the stairs from the kitchen, voluble with exclamation and inquiry.

What did it mean? Such a thing had never before happened! "It is that rascal of a Caubet again!"

The Abbé got ready earlier than he otherwise would and went up the alley to the church. He made his way to the square room under the tower where the bell-ropes were. It was true that Jean Caubet had to be up in the belfry to ring the *volées,* but he might have come down. He must be reprimanded sharply for his dereliction. . . . But Jean Caubet was not here. Nor, in entering

the open door to the stairs winding upward, could the Abbé hear the least sound of a footstep.

He waited. Still no Caubet. He ought to be here, now, to ring the *avancées*. After waiting a few minutes more, the Abbé decided to ring them himself. This done, he went to the stairway again and listened. Still no sign of the bell-ringer.

There was yet a scanty twenty minutes left before mass. Clearly, there would not be time for him to climb all the way up to the belfry and see what had happened. But at this moment the *suisse* appeared. Him the Abbé asked to go up.

"You may meet Caubet on his way down. In any event, say that I must see him after mass. I will have some one ring for the beginning of mass and the sanctus. If Caubet does not ring the angelus, you see to it."

The *suisse* started up the narrow steps, while the Abbé murmured to himself:

"It is hard to understand! He is old, and I begin to fear for him. He may have been taken ill, suddenly. At least, that would explain it."

After mass was over, the people filed out into the open place in front of the church and gathered in groups, still talking about the incident of the bells. The angelus was through ringing; but no one had seen Jean Caubet. Some did not hesitate to condemn him roundly, saying that doubtless the whole thing was but another of his mean tricks to get more money out of the curé.

"And, I tell you, he won't stand that! No, the curé is patient, but Jean Caubet will find that he has gone too far this time!"

As for the Abbé, as soon as he could, he went back

to the door leading to the tower. To his surprise, he found it shut. He tried the handle, but the door was fast. He knocked sharply, and it was opened by the *suisse,* who, seeing it was the Abbé, beckoned him in and locked it again.

"To keep the people out," he said.

On the floor, near the center where the ropes hung, lay Jean Caubet, the little doctor kneeling beside him. Sarrade, who had helped carry him down from the belfry, was standing near by. The old man lay there motionless. His coat had been removed, and his blue shirt was ripped aside and showed his withered throat. His eyes were open, but they were glazed and sightless.

The doctor arose.

"He is dead, Monsieur l'Abbé. We found him on the floor of the *clocher,* by the bells. I have warned him for some time about his heart. Lately I have told him that he must not climb to the *clocher* any more. He would not listen. . . . He is dead. There is nothing can be done."

It is strange how, when the news of old Jean Caubet's death spread about the village that day, people became less harsh in their judgments upon him. Some actually found good things to say of him. After all, he had rung the bells faithfully ever since most of them were little children, and he had become part of the life of the village. He would be missed. When Courrou, the harness-maker, who knew him well, tolled the bell of the dead that sunset, there were a few who, hearing it, remembered the old bell-ringer as he was in his happier days, and genuinely lamented his passing.

Late that evening, Monsieur Fitte, the notary, returned from a business journey to Auch. Monsieur Fitte was a marked figure in Aignan, with his close-clipped black hair, his well-trimmed mustache, and his smart felt hat, quite likely imported from Paris. He greeted Sarrade, the sabot-maker, in front of his shop with a high-pitched, husky voice, full of good will, and heard from him the news. Although he went straight on to his home in the Street of the Church, he did not stay there long; in less than half an hour, he was out again and on his way around the Back Street to the house of the curé, whom he hoped to find still up. A light shone from a downstairs window, as he sounded the knocker. Abbé Pierre himself soon appeared at the door, surprised to see the notary at this hour, and wondering what his business might be. However, he welcomed his visitor cordially and asked him into the dining room, where an oil lamp was burning on the table by an open volume of *R. P. Stephani Menochii Commentarii totius Scripturae.*

No, Monsieur Fitte would not sit down. He could stay only a moment.

"It is late, Monsieur l'Abbé. You will pardon me for intruding upon you at this time. But I have been away and only just now I have learned of Jean Caubet's sad death. It is very dreadful, is it not! . . . It is concerning him that I have taken the liberty of calling upon you without further delay."

"You say you want to see me about him? . . . I hardly understand."

The notary reached into the inside pocket of his coat and produced two long envelopes. After examining

their superscriptions, he handed one of them to the Abbé, saying:

"This is for you. It is a letter—from Jean Caubet. Let me explain: he came to me at my house over a month ago and asked me to put down the words just as he told them to me. I was not to show it or to speak of it to anybody, he said. He watched me seal it, as you see it now, and asked me to keep it carefully for him. 'If anything should happen to me,' he told me, 'please hand it to the curé. Put Monsieur l'Abbé's name on the outside,' he added, 'then there will be no mistake.' So, I did—and here it is!"

The Abbé fingered the letter curiously, turning it over, gazing first at his own name and then at the seal.

"You know the contents, then."

"But, yes! And so I am aware that all this could have waited until to-morrow. Still, it was, perhaps, my duty to see you as soon as possible. . . . And now, I must be going!" Monsieur reached for his hat.

"You did rightly to come at once. A promise to the dead is doubly sacred. . . . But will you not remain while I read this letter?"

"I assure you, it is not necessary, Monsieur l'Abbé. Ah, I was almost forgetting! I will leave also with you this other document. It is none other than a copy of Caubet's will. You might return it to me at your leisure. Read the letter first, and you will understand." The notary again insisted that he must go, so the Abbé followed him to the door, where the two shook hands and said their *"Bonsoirs."*

The Abbé went back to his armchair by the table in the dining room. He tore open the letter. It covered

several pages. He moved the lamp closer. This is what he read:

"I have seen the bells in all the places around here. At first, I thought I liked the one at Demu; but it is the one at Lartigue I like the best. It has lilies along the edge of it—the lilies are all around the edge, and that makes it very pretty. On one side, in the middle, it has a cross and a crown of thorns.

"A bell like that is what I would like you and the *maire* to buy with the money I have been saving for so long a time, to take the place of our little bell that is cracked. And now for the important thing, which is the name to give it. Please call the bell 'Sainte Agnès.' Her name—my wife's name, I mean—it was Agnès. It is all for her—ah, yes, Monsieur l'Abbé, for the glory of God, also, as you might remind me—but you can see how it can be for the glory of God and for her, too, at the same time? Please put this on the bell: 'Sainte Agnès pray for us'; like the bell at Lartigue, only it is 'St. André' on the bell there.

"I know what people think. They say that old Jean Caubet is very selfish. Even you yourself, Monsieur l'Abbé—that time you blamed me and used the word, 'avarice.' But now, perhaps, you understand. It was not for 'the goods of this world,' as you called them, but for the love of God—and her.

"I could have told you about it all long ago. I thought of it. But I said to myself, I want to be sure; if I am dead, people may be sorry then, and do what I ask, and put her name on my bell.

"You just go to my workbench, and there is a board

on top, the one at the very back. It looks like the rest. But only lift it, and you will see a wooden box nailed under it. You would never think it was there. My money is in it. The notary has fixed a paper to make everything as the law says. The key to the box is with the other keys. It is on my chain I carry with me. But if I die in bed, the keys are on a nail by the kitchen door.

"Forgive me, Monsieur l'Abbé, for all the trouble I have made for you. Pray for me!"

The Abbé sighed and laid down the letter. He sat there, silent, for a long time.

VII

THE ABBÉ GOES ON AN ERRAND

Now that it was spring, the Abbé often went, early in the morning, down the road that led past the cemetery. Just beyond, he would take out his keys, unlock the gates to his father's vineyard, and make for the garden house that stood near by. This he would enter, leaving the door wide open for light and air. Here he loved to read and meditate, away from the distractions of the village and undisturbed by the household noises of Aunt Madeleine, whose shrill voice sometimes shattered his musings.

This morning, however, the soft freshness of the air and the glorious seduction of the sunshine led him beyond the garden house, past the fig tree with its bench, to the highest point of the garden, where he stood looking out over the wide sweep of landscape to the south. He watched the mists as they rose higher and higher, gradually revealing the gentle green of hill after hill, until, at last, his eyes dimly discerned, full twelve miles away, the elegantly pointed spire of Auriébat—the most distant thing made by man's hand that one could see on this May morning.

After awhile, he went back and opened the door to the garden house. Once inside, he suddenly remembered a certain volume of St. Cyprien which he had intended to bring with him. He decided not to go home again

for it; instead, he picked up a life of St. François d'Assise, by St. Bonaventure, which lay on a box by the table.

"I have not read it so many times that I cannot profit by reading it again. The blessed St. François, who made such a virtue of poverty, would perhaps have liked this place," he added, as his eye swept the barren walls and dirt floor.

The Abbé became so intent upon the fascinating pages of the "seraphic doctor" that the morning sped by without any consciousness of time. He was only aroused at noon by the ringing of the angelus; and he looked up from his book through the open door surprised that the morning had gone so soon. He hastily arose, crossed himself, repeated the prayer to the Virgin, after which he stood gazing at the silver crucifix that stood on his table. Then he sighed.

"I fear that after all the holy St. François would not approve of my mode of life. Certainly, with his abjuring of books, he would hardly have admitted me into his order of Friars Minor. I must keep in mind that saying of his: 'As much knowledge hath a man as he doth work.' Which reminds me of something I have neglected. I must go to see the mayor this very afternoon."

What the Abbé had in mind was that, although Jean Caubet had been dead nearly two weeks, nothing had yet been done about his bequest for the new bell, with his wife's name on it. With Fitte, the notary, he had gone to the old man's workshop and had found the money in the box under his workbench, just where he said it was. But he could do nothing about the bell on

his own authority—Dr. Dousset, the mayor, must be seen. Several times he had called in vain at the *mairie*. To-day, he determined to visit him at his house. He would be likely to find him in at two o'clock, just after the hour reserved for his patients. If the truth were known, he felt a little timid about going to see the mayor—he dreaded his brusqueness; much as he admired his practical efficiency. Besides—it was regrettable—but Dr. Dousset was not what one might call a religious man.

After dinner, he started out. He walked by the postman's house and stopped to look at a wooden cage hung outside containing a partridge. In front of Lignac's shop, he passed the daughter of Cazac, the guardian of the forest, so bent under a great bundle of fagots that her face was almost hidden. A little farther, he had to step to the side of the road to make way for a group of *gendarmes* hurrying along on their bicycles. As he neared the mayor's house, a man emerged from the gates of the vineyard across the road, pushing a cart in which was a huge barrel. He was stained from head to foot—his hat, his face and hands, his clothes, even his buttons, all a vivid green from the spraying of the vines.

"*Bonjour,* Cocharaux!" said the Abbé pleasantly. But his greeting must have been drowned by the noisy rattle of the cart, for Cocharaux would not look up and did not reply.

When the Abbé arrived in front of the mayor's house, he looked through the gates of the driveway and saw Dick, the hunting dog, busy with a bone under the shade of the chestnut tree, now covered with great

white blossoms. Close by stood the mayor's shining new automobile, which had arrived from Riscle only a few days before. True, Dr. Pouy also had an automobile; but, after all, it was only an old derelict; while this, a Peugeot, with its bright nickel trimmings outlining the black gloss of the low, graceful body, was something which people came to their doors to see!

At least, the little doctor was at home, then! The Abbé climbed the steps to the entrance and stood in the shade of the marquise. The door stood open, and the Abbé was about to knock when he heard voices from the direction of the room where the doctor received his patients. After all, he was too early. He must wait. He entered the hallway and stood there, absently regarding the doctor's new scale of prices—higher, now, since the war—posted on a mirror, over which was a printed sign:

DOCTEUR O. DOUSSET
CONSULTATIONS TOUS LES JOURS
DE 1 HEURE À 2 HEURES
ET LE LUNDI DE 1 HEURE À 5 HEURES

On the other side of the hall, the door of the salon was lightly ajar. It was darker in there; but a beam of light from one of the shutters slanted across an old Gaveau piano and struck a table in the corner, on which stood a cunningly wrought cabinet for liqueurs made by Jean-Louis Sance, the mayor's father-in-law, now dead. Ah, there was a man for you! How the Abbé missed him!

Suddenly, the door at the end of the hall opened and

a peasant appeared, followed by the alert figure of the doctor, who was giving rapid directions about his prescription, to be filled by Frezignac, the pharmacist. The peasant presently shuffled outside, and for the first time the doctor noticed the Abbé. He advanced with his quick, decisive manner.

"Monsieur l'Abbé! Pardon! I did not know you were here! . . . You wished to consult me?"

"Not as a physician, Monsieur le Docteur, but as *maire!*" smiled the Abbé. "Pardon me for coming at this time; but it was necessary to see you."

"Ah! I am sorry. I was about to go to a patient in the country." The doctor took out his watch. "Still, I can spare you a few minutes, if it is important." And he opened the door of the salon and invited the Abbé to a chair. The little doctor himself did not sit down, but took a step this way and that, then finally stood still and looked at the Abbé expectantly. The Abbé cleared his throat:

"It is about Jean Caubet. Although we all thought that he was very poor, he left a letter for me, and even a will. . . ."

"Yes, yes! I know all about that. Fitte told me." The little doctor suddenly sat down. "But the money is not enough for a new bell. Even a small bell costs more than Caubet had any idea of."

This aspect of the matter had not yet occurred to the Abbé. Like Caubet, he was unversed in the price of bells. After considering a moment, he suggested, hopefully:

"Perhaps we could get more money to add to Caubet's savings. The bell, as you know, is badly cracked.

Surely, something can be done to carry out poor Caubet's wishes! . . . I myself will be glad to give. . . ."

"You can't afford it, Monsieur l'Abbé! Besides, it is clear that the family of de Verges, who gave the bell, would object to having it replaced. And as for Caubet's notion of having his wife's name on it . . . well, even if the money was enough, it is out of the question."

The Abbé was greatly distressed.

"But Caubet's money, Monsieur le Maire! He stinted himself and saved year after year for just this purpose! We cannot use the money for anything else. It would not be right."

The little doctor made a grimace. "Whether it would be right or not, it is plain it wouldn't be legal. No, we couldn't use it for anything else. That's the pity."

"And it's too much to throw away," the Abbé urged. "Then, there are Caubet's wishes to consider, Monsieur le Maire."

The mayor stroked his mustache and frowned. Finally:

"Well, well, well! . . . There is one thing: the money might be enough to have the bell recast. But the name of de Verges must remain on it. That is absolutely essential. Caubet was half crazy . . . anyway, he didn't understand these things."

But the Abbé persisted. "It was for the memory of his wife that he wanted to give the bell at all. I . . ."

"Yes," cried the mayor, impatiently, "I know, I know! . . . But—you see the difficulty, Monsieur l'Abbé! There is no getting around it."

The Abbé smiled and then raised his mild eyes to the doctor's:

"In Margouet, when they recast their big bell, they put on it, under the name of the donor, the name of Monsieur Baurens, who gave the money for the recasting."

"M-m-m! . . . Are you certain?"

"But yes; there is no doubt whatever. The Abbé Préchac told me. That would offend nobody." The Abbé grew bolder. "And it would only be just."

The mayor ran his fingers through his thick brush of hair. "Well," he assented, a little grudgingly, "I see nothing against that, Monsieur l'Abbé. No, after all, there is nothing against that. . . . You may proceed with it that way if you wish. I will leave it to you." And the little doctor arose and accompanied the Abbé into the hall. As he took down his hat and coat from the hook by the mirror, he turned:

"Have you found a new bell-ringer yet?"

"Courrou has been seeing to it. I am hoping he will continue. Since he now lives in my father's old house near the church, it will be easier for him than it was for Caubet—especially in the winter. Still, he puts me off . . ."

"Courrou ought to do it. He is not so busy. He has time. Besides," and the little doctor smiled, "being a harness-maker, he can mend the ropes himself when they need it!" And picking up his bag, he abruptly hurried down to his automobile, which, a minute later, was moving smoothly out the gates and down the road.

Just as the Abbé was descending the steps, he was arrested by the voice of Madame Sance, who called to him from the door. He turned about and looked up and

saw not only this charming old lady, but her daughter, Marthe, the little doctor's wife—a robust type of beauty, whose attractive virtues contributed much to her husband's popularity:

"Don't hurry away, Monsieur l'Abbé!" Madame Sance was saying. "We are just about to sit outside, here." . . . She turned to her daughter. "Where is Robert? He can bring the chairs."

Madame Dousset turned back to the door and called, "Robert!" But there was no response. Robert was her thirteen-year-old son, home from the Lycée for a two days' holiday. She came out and looked toward the barns. "Robert!" she called again. The bird dog pricked up his ears questioningly, got up, and came toward the house. But no Robert.

"We might go into the garden," suggested Madame Sance. "It is shady now on the bench by the pond." When Madame Sance smiled, it made her look like a young girl.

The Abbé had been hesitating about whether he ought not to be on his way. But when Madame Sance mentioned the garden, he brightened and said:

"I may go and see your garden for a moment. I have not been there since last summer—the time when your daughter, Germaine, was married."

So the Abbé accompanied the two women across the driveway and through a gate in the low stone wall into the ample garden, whose paths wound in and out in a delightfully informal way among tall pines and yews. A long pond separated the garden from the road. By its edge they sat.

The Abbé turned to Madame Sance, who was already

plying her needles. "And what do you hear from Germaine? Is she happy in America?"

"We miss her!" sighed Madame Sance.

"Just at this time of year," added Madame Dousset, "my sister spent much of her time here in the garden. These roses . . . she set them out herself."

"I saw them from the road. Whenever one looks at the garden, one thinks of Germaine. I once described it in a letter to a colleague of mine in Paris. I called it, 'Germaine's garden.' "

"Monsieur l'Abbé asked for news," pursued Madame Dousset, looking toward her mother. "We had a letter lately. Germaine's husband is still a professor in a college in the province of Ohio. She has a house with plaster on the outside, just like our Gascon houses; only, the roof is not tile. She has a garden, too. We sent her some seeds of parsley the other day."

"You have forgotten the principal news," added Madame Sance, her face lighting up with pleasure. "My daughter and her husband are to come back to us next year and spend the whole summer!"

Just then, the Abbé, looking toward the road, espied Madame Lacoste approaching the driveway. Now, Madame Lacoste was a great friend of the little doctor's family, and also the most prolific gossip in the village. The Abbé felt that it was clearly time for him to go. So he arose, made his excuses, and was departing just as she entered the garden gate, where he had to pass her. She greeted him with a gracious politeness which carried one back to the happy time when her husband was alive and she was rich and lived in a château. But Madame Sance and her daughter were

already hastening up the path to greet her, so the Abbé was enabled to escape without having to hear what her mind was full of—her grievance against "that Cocharaux," who had been spraying her vineyard, and whom she had had to discharge that very day. It was disgraceful! The impudence of him! What had he done? Why, the wine she had been allowing him with his dinner as a gift he boldly claimed as a right, and actually demanded still more of it to carry home with him! It was preposterous!

The Abbé, overhearing some of this before he reached the road, murmured, "Cocharaux is insolent. When I see him, I must take him to task!"

While the Abbé was thinking of this scamp of a Cocharaux, a large automobile came speeding from the direction of the village. As it passed in a cloud of dust, with the rapid staccato of a blatant horn, the Abbé noticed the coat of arms blazoned on the side. It was de Catude, who boasted the title of Baron, and lived in the château east of the village—the very one that used to belong to Madame Lacoste. He and his family had no respect for the Abbé, and never went to church. He had recently married a young wife, "so that," as Madame Lacoste had caustically remarked, "some, at least, of his offspring might be legitimate."

The Abbé shook his cassock free of dust and walked on, his hands behind his back, his head bent. He felt humiliated. Suddenly, he heard a voice greeting him, and looked up. It was the half-wit, old Jules Michaud, who lived all alone out the Margouet road. He was drunk. He grinned foolishly, and swayed a little where he stood.

"Where are you going, Jules?" the Abbé demanded, sternly.

"Where am I going? It's this way. This morning I came . . . you see, Monsieur l'Abbé . . ."

"Did you walk, Jules? Or did somebody bring you?"

"Me? Ah!"

The old man did not seem to comprehend the Abbé's question, so he repeated it: "Who was it that brought you, Jules? Think!"

"Think! Yes. Lartigue is my friend. Don't say anything against Lartigue. He is my friend, I tell you. . . ."

"You came with Lartigue? Where is he, now?"

But the old man did not answer. It was as if he had forgotten the Abbé. He lurched abruptly to one side; then resumed his way with unsteady steps, muttering nonsense.

The Abbé knew well enough what had happened. Old Jules had come to the village, and they had plied him with drink at the *buvette,* in order to make him talk. It was sufficiently amusing when the old man's tongue got started. . . . The Abbé was incensed. Old Jules had been driven out of his mind two years before, when his wife and son were both killed by lightning. . . . They must have made him drink more than usual, this time. To take advantage of the old man like that! It was unspeakable!

The Abbé stood a moment in doubt, and then started after Jules. What to do he did not know; but, just then he heard the rattle of wheels behind him, and a voice, "Ah-eee! Coco!" and the crack of a whip. He looked back. A large, white mule, hitched to a rickety cart, was approaching, driven by Lartigue, the blacksmith at

Margouet. When the equipage drew near, the Abbé raised his hand as a signal to stop.

"Whoa! Coco!" cried Lartigue. His big, florid face broke into a good-natured smile as he greeted the Abbé and solicitously asked if he could assist him on his way.

The Abbé ignored the offer. He looked at Lartigue severely.

"You brought Jules to the village. Do not deny it! You should not have done it. You know what happens at the *buvette*. I only hope you had no part in it!"

Lartigue raised his hands indignantly.

"But he was coming anyway, Monsieur l'Abbé! He was walking along. All I did was to ask him to ride. I told him not to go to the *buvette*. But what could I do? . . . Then, I looked for him to bring him home, but I couldn't find him anywhere!"

The Abbé softened a little. After all, it could not be said to be Lartigue's fault, although, as the Abbé told him, he might have stayed with the old man and kept him from harm. He pointed down the road.

"You will find him a little ahead, there. . . . He just left me. . . . There he is, sitting over yonder by the hedge just this side of the Madonna! See that he gets safely home!"

"But surely, Monsieur l'Abbé. *Bonjour!* . . . Aheee! Coco!" And with a sudden jerk that threatened to demolish the flimsy cart, Coco was on his way.

The Abbé slowly turned and started back toward the village. His head was bowed a trifle lower. These, his parishioners! That Cocharaux! That de Catude! And now, old Jules, and those who had no pity on his sad state, but made sport of his infirmity! His parishioners,

indeed! Was there any human frailty they did not represent? Why, if it was not sins of commission, it was sins of omission. Perhaps this last was the worst. Plain failures! Sands that did not even serve to measure time in an hourglass, but were lost through a sieve!

The Abbé sighed and shook his head mournfully. "The curé of a parish often thinks of himself pleasantly as a shepherd of sheep. They are more like oxen. What one needs is not a staff, but a goad!"

Occupied with this discouraging reflection, the Abbé had forgotten to turn into the Back Street, and, before he knew it, found himself by the church. He stopped and looked up at the walls—a grotesque patchwork of stones old and new, put there at different times by sundry hands through many centuries: traces of old Roman windows, filled in now with stones of a different color; insertions of larger Gothic windows by their sides; one could see, too, where the old roof once began, much lower than the present roof—what a medley, what a medley! . . . Yet, how he loved these crumbling walls and what they represented! His mood became gentler. He began to upbraid himself for the hard thoughts he had just been thinking about his people. His mind reverted to Madame Sance and her daughters; Madame Lacoste; Lignac, the blacksmith; Sarrade, the sabot-maker, and oh! so many others! Again he glanced up at the patched walls. All at once, they reminded him of himself—he who had been so hasty to condemn.

"St. François somewhere describes the perfect Friar, with his patience, his generous sense, his fairness and devoutness, his fervor of charity, his mind always with

the Lord. I fear I fall as far short of the blessed Father's ideal as this wall here falls short of perfection in architecture. For, like this wall, I am but a miserable patchwork of good and bad. It is not for me to blame others too much!"

VIII

AN INCIDENT OF THE ARENA

I

The swaggering figure of Raoul Fourcade had not been seen lately at the popular Café Dumeste. The fact was that ever since the pretty Élise, the proprietor's daughter, had spurned him for a rival, he had taken to frequenting the quieter café of Rigot, on the other side of the Place. It was damnable to have to go so near the shop of that scamp of a barber, Boubée—he who had given him the so very short hair-cut, *à l'Américaine,* and had thereby made him the butt of ridicule for weeks afterwards. But there were compensations—oh, yes, in the mind of this redoubtable youth there were ample compensations!

For, only four doors away from Rigot's, under the arcades, was a grain store; and in the grain store was to be found treasure far more shapely and precious than the bulging sacks that lay along the walls. Her name was Colette—Colette Roziès; and, besides her store, she possessed other attractions that made her extremely desirable to Raoul Fourcade. To list these attractions would be a most delightful task for any man; Raoul had done it often; but, by the time you had admired her abundant hair—glossy hair, as black as the night—and the bold beauty of her profile, making you think of

Spanish girls across the border, and when you were about to consider more in detail the gracious seductions of her ripe figure, her large, liquid eyes were likely to turn your way and convict you of being a fool for having looked at anything else.

At first, Colette found her new suitor merely amusing. She could not easily forget how comical he had appeared that day when he had come out of the barber shop, shorn of his splendid hair and mustache, his head looking like a little pumpkin! But now that his hair had grown again, and he could twist up the ends of his mustache with all his old-time nonchalance, he was fetching enough. Insensibly and by degrees, she was attracted to him. He carried about with him a glamour that none of the other gallants of the village seemed to possess—a glamour which lightened the routine of what was, after all, a rather humdrum life. For Colette did not spend her time idly. No; now that her uncle was dead and her aunt too old to attend to the business, it was she who must see to the store—and this she did efficiently and well. Into this rather sober world of hers came Raoul, with his fascinating talk of the arena and the *course landaise,* that great sport of the south, in which men contend with wild cows and become popular heroes in the measure of their valor and skill. Every few days he would go away. He was training, he said, with the *troupeau* belonging to Barrère, of Gabarret. He confided to her that when Barrère's famous *ganaderia* came to Aignan in May for the annual fête of the village, he himself, Raoul—what glory! —would actually appear in the arena for the first time.

Colette's cousin, Yvonne, who sometimes came to

visit Colette, saw how things were going and was none too pleased. The little god had never yet blinded her eyes.

"This Fourcade has no prospects, and he is after your money. He is going to be one of those good-for-nothing *écarteurs*. Think of that for a business! Already, he is like them all: he thinks of nothing but drink and women—he even tried to flirt with me, once!" Yvonne snapped her pretty fingers in disgust.

But Colette only looked out dreamily upon the Place, across which Raoul was jauntily approaching.

Certain it is that Raoul's swagger took on an extra insolence these days. He even congratulated himself that the fickle Élise had broken off with him that time. Let that Georges Lagarde have her! What did he care? After all, there is good in everything to the one who is clever enough! This Colette had property. The business and much besides would all be hers when her aunt died, which would not be long, since, in the goodness of God and the frailty of human flesh, old women do not live always. As for the state of Colette's heart —well, Raoul was sure that she must have capitulated to his pleadings long ago, but for one circumstance—a circumstance all too often the impediment to the course of true love—another man.

His name was a strange one for Gascony—Max Engel; but the strangeness of it was accounted for by the fact that he was not a Gascon at all, but a Swiss, who had come to these parts the summer before and had bought him a farm just outside the village.

Now, physically, this Max Engel was the most powerful man the village had ever seen. His height was

beyond what a Gascon can aspire to. His figure was heroically erect; he had a big chest, great, muscular arms, wide shoulders, and a bull-like neck, on which was set a comely head with a Greek profile, crowned with flaxen hair. He had competed in the games once, and had won the shot-put easily—in fact, after he had heaved the great iron ball clear across the field, all the other contestants quit then and there. It was no use.

Still, he was not popular. The villagers resented him as they resented the intrusion of any foreigner. These Swiss, since the war—they were buying up too many of the good lands. People were also suspicious. Boubée hinted to Bajac, the butcher, that he was not really Swiss at all, but a Boche. Look at his name! And that sister of his, with her golden hair! Once, on a market-day, Sidonie had heard them speaking together: she said it sounded suspiciously like German.

It was wholly natural that Max Engel should drop into Colette's store sooner or later. He came in to buy grain; but he stayed to talk about other things, and it is certain that, at these times, he spoke very good French. He was shy for so big a man; but shy men are sometimes determined. It was remarkable how often he needed things that only she could sell him. She sold him a sack of chicken feed at three different times, although, as yet, he had no chickens. Once he got up courage, and asked her and her aunt to go with himself and his sister to an entertainment at the convent school. On Sundays, after mass, he acquired the habit of meeting Colette, entirely by accident, in the open place by the church.

At first, Raoul looked upon this interloper with super-

cilious disdain. He mentioned him derisively to Colette, and mocked at him as "that crude foreigner." But when Colette did not laugh with him as heartily as he expected, he became a little worried. One can never tell the vagaries of women, he reflected. So he pressed her more than ever to commit herself to a speedy marriage. But for some strange reason, she still held him off. Perhaps she was thinking of what her cousin, Yvonne, had said: "He is after your money!" Or, perhaps, she knew well enough that she would never marry this shallow dandy, however much she felt flattered by his attentions. If only this Max Engel, now, were not a foreigner and not so unpopular with everybody; and, above all, if he were not so woefully lacking in the dash she liked in a man—why, although she had given him every opportunity, he had not yet even dared to say a tenth of the gallant things that Raoul said to her almost every day! She preferred a man with some backbone to him!

But although Raoul found himself constantly postponed in his wooing, even having to put up with ridicule when his attentions became too ardent, he saw one brilliant ray of sunshine: it was only a short time, now, before the great fête, when he would make his appearance before the admiring hundreds crowding the arena to witness the *course*.

"That will decide her!" he said to himself complacently. For he was certain that he would acquit himself with credit. He had practiced much lately, and had been given pointers by no less a man than Koran, a retired *écarteur*, known all over Gascony.

One morning, just ten days before the fête, he was

standing in front of the *mairie* regarding a splendid poster in red and green, announcing the coming event. There were half a dozen such posters in conspicuous positions about the Place; one of them entirely filled the window of Colette's store. Raoul had procured that one himself, and she had put it up, although she complained that it made her shop too dark.

The poster, at least seven feet long, depicted the gallant figure of an *écarteur* at the triumphant moment when, having just evaded the mad charge of a wild cow, he nobly acknowledges the plaudits of the multitude. Down below this heroic figure, in large type, were blazoned the names of *écarteurs* who were to appear. This list Raoul Fourcade read several times with great satisfaction, lingering with a relish at his own name, which seemed to stand out heroically in the midst of that noted array:

BRAS-DE-FER
CANDAU
MAZZANTINI
CANTEGRIT (JEUNE)
CANTEGRIT (AÎNÉ)
FOURCADE
FABER, SAUTEUR
MARTIAL, CORDE

Next came the list of the famous cows that were to furnish the sport—cows of noble ancestry—Spanish cows, of the race Carriquiri, as well as of the race Tabernera; Provençal cows, illustriously known as "the flowers of Camargue." Oh, it was a brave poster! And

for Raoul to read his name on it was for him to realize the only ambition of his life—unless one mentions that other ambition, so lately born, to win Colette Roziès as his own.

II

What the bull-fight is to Spain, so is the *course landaise* to the south of France. In all the villages of Gascony, it is by far the greatest event of the year. Instead of bulls, you have wild cows, as unlike ordinary cows as an elegant race horse is unlike a ponderous Percheron; cows that have been carefully bred and selected for generations, heroines of a hundred arenas. They have never calved; they are lean, sinewy, almost udderless, fleet as a deer. Then, instead of the toreador of the Spanish game, you have the famous *écarteur*—so named because the crucial moment of the sport is his skillful dodge, or *écart,* before the onrush of the cow, when he must let the horns come as near him as possible without actually touching. A hazardous business, this, and well worth the applause and money that reward the victors—those bravely adroit ones that escape the beasts' horns most narrowly the greatest number of times.

The week before the Sunday when the great fête was to occur was a busy one for Aignan. Out on the road beyond the convent school, in the space known as the ox-market, there was the sound of much sawing and hammering, where the amphitheatre, with its high tiers of seats, and the fence, which served as a barrier between the spectators and the arena, were being erected.

Only the row of ten stalls at the south end was a permanent fixture—for each cow there was one stall, out of whose door she would rush to make her charge. Grass and weeds were being cleared away and the earth beaten down. In one corner, a *buvette* was being built, so that the *écarteurs* might refresh themselves from time to time. Near the center of the arena, where the men had already finished clearing out the weeds, children were making a nuisance of themselves by playing at *course landaise*. Lignac's boy, with a curved stick of wood to represent a horn, was the cow. Lowering his head, he galloped wildly at a little *écarteur,* who tried to dodge the stick by too narrow a margin and was ignominiously hit in the stomach and knocked over. Instantly arose a storm of protests against the impromptu cow from the friends of the defeated hero:

"You did it wrong! You did it wrong!"

"Yes! You moved the horn!"

"It's no fair!"

"I didn't either! I held it tight so it didn't wiggle at all! Just like a horn!"

"He didn't! He didn't! He moved it half a meter!"

"Shut up! I guess I know! Isn't my father one of the judges? I guess I don't make mistakes like that!"

By Friday morning, some of the concessions came, and were set up in the Place, chief of them being the merry-go-round, together with the horse that walked around on the inside to make it go. And that very evening the cows arrived. They were led by a Bretonne cow with an immense bell hanging from her neck to warn everybody of the approach of the wild beasts. The bell was first heard from the hill of the Jaimet, a

mile away. Excitedly, people hastened to close their gates and hurried inside their houses, and on every side could be heard the cry:

"Les vaches de course! Les vaches de course arrivent!"

As the cows reached the outskirts of the village and filed down the Road of the Madonna, children peeked fearfully at them from behind windows and doors. With an alert and vigorous trot they passed, urged on by the drivers—cows known all over Gascony by name: there was the renowned Capitana, and Pelouquina, and Trompetta, and Mogona, and Canouta, and their equally famous sisters, heads in air, horns belligerent, until, at last, they were all herded into the big barn by Lignac's blacksmith shop and securely locked up. Then, indeed, people could breathe again!

Saturday, the day before the fête, it was hard for anybody to do any work. Even Abbé Pierre complained that there was so much excitement in the air that he had to leave his study and go around to the Place to see what was going on. More concessions were arriving with every hour. The Place was being transformed into a small wonder-city, utterly confusing, with the booths of the traveling merchants, covered with gay awnings, and with tents, and wagons, and swings, and itinerant shows, and shooting galleries, and bakers' stalls—all getting ready for the business of the morrow. Over near the arena, the greased pole was being put in position for the games—slanted so that it leaned perilously over the pond. People who watched already laughed in anticipation.

All day long, Raoul Fourcade was basking in the

glory of the coming event. He felt his importance and believed that everybody watched his comings and goings with admiration and envy. He was careful to be seen drinking with some of the newly arrived *écarteurs* at the Café Dumeste, which he had not visited for months. Here, he openly snubbed Élise, who was helping to serve, insolently shouting his orders to her, as if she were a menial. He made the most of his grandeur with Colette, parading with her and her cousin up and down the Place that night, while the fireworks were going on and the band played in front of the *mairie*. Once they passed Élise and Georges. When Georges would have spoken, Raoul looked blankly over his head at the roof of the Bon Marché.

Max and his sister were there, too, and Colette smiled at him with bewildering witchery as he brushed her in the crowd; but as she was about to linger and chat a moment, Fourcade impatiently urged her on, with an air of proprietorship which she resented a little, but which, nevertheless, thrilled her.

Much later, when Fourcade had escorted her home and she and Yvonne were undressing for bed, Yvonne remarked:

"What you see in that idiot of a Fourcade, I don't understand!"

Colette stopped in the process of taking down her long, black hair and smiled at her image in the mirror. Then she turned about, pretending to be angry:

"He is no idiot! You are always running him down! You are jealous!"

"Pouf! Jealous! *A Dieu ne plaise!* I would prefer that Max Engel to all your silly Fourcades!"

"Well, why don't you go after him, then? Bah! Max —he is too placid, I tell you! I admire a man that *is* a man—a man that can *do* things!" She continued in the same strain. It pleased her to plague her cousin. Besides, alas, there was some truth in what she said. "Fancy Max doing what an *écarteur* has to do! It takes bravery. Wait until to-morrow. People will see! Which reminds me that Raoul has given us seats in the grandstand. Right near the center."

"No doubt he got them for nothing. . . . Oh, well! Have your own way. *C'est une affaire de goût!*"

What Colette really wondered in her heart was whether she had not gone too far in this affair with Raoul. She would like to make this Max Engel jealous—the timid one! But what if she ended in frightening him off entirely? At the thought an absurd pang of unhappiness distressed her.

The stage was set. The village and all the country round was ready for the dawning of Sunday and its long-discussed events. As the first rays of the rising sun touched the belfry of the church, the doors of Lignac's barn opened, and the cows came out, impatiently crowding into the road, eager for the air and sun. Down the Road of the Madonna and up the Back Street they were driven, past Abbé Pierre's house, the scurry of their hoofs and the shouting of the drivers awakening the Abbé a good two hours before it was necessary for him to get up for early mass. On down the road and into the gates of the arena they were hurried, and, after much hallooing and maneuvering, each was imprisoned in her own private stall.

One is well aware that plenty of vivid sun makes

a good fête; and there was ample promise of a cloudless day. When the bell rang for the 11 o'clock mass, more people went than usual, partly to hear the band, which sounded surprisingly loud in the church, its brassy din crashing down the aisles and assaulting the very roof. After mass the band unanimously repaired to the front of the café, where they greatly shortened their "apéritif concert" to go inside, feeling desperately in need of refreshments. After church, Max tried to see Colette as usual; but Fourcade was ahead of him. Oh, well, it was Fourcade's day, not his. He went home, a bitter pain in his heart.

By three o'clock, great throngs of people were crowding over toward the amphitheatre, laughing, talking, gesticulating, eager for the sport of the day. It was a highly good-natured crowd—they had just had their dinners, and everybody eats—yes, and drinks—especially well on a fête-day like this, with visitors from the country who demand the best one has. The nearer the arena one got, the harder it was to make any progress—one had to make way for ox-carts, and horse-carts, and bicycles, and all sorts of conveyances with two wheels or four, pouring in from all the roads for miles around. Inside the arena there was a wild scrambling for seats, especially on the side away from the sun. Once seated, one could not help looking, the first thing, at the row of stalls under the grandstand, behind whose closed doors the cows were impatiently waiting their turns. Then one raised one's eyes to the grandstand itself, gay with the tricolor and streamers of red bunting, where those who could afford it were leisurely finding their seats. There, in the very center stood the

mayor and honorary President, Dr. Dousset, and talking with him was the distinguished senator of the *département.* And there came Lignac, the lame blacksmith, chairman of the judges, taking his place with two of his confrères at the very front of everybody, where he could overlook everything that went on. There was not a *course* in this part of the country that Lignac missed; he followed all the fêtes; and you could be sure that he was able to discuss an *écart* within the fraction of a centimeter!

It was nearing four o'clock. The arena was quieting down. Very few were coming in, now. The seats were all filled. Many were standing behind the barriers. Suddenly, from toward the village, the sound of the band was heard, coming nearer and nearer. At the far end of the enclosure, the gates swung open. In they came, the band first, twenty men strong, headed by the stocky figure of Sarrade, the sabot-maker, and followed by the *écarteurs,* spread out in an open formation which set off their picturesque costumes to advantage.

A great cheer went up. Around the arena the procession marched to the strains of enlivening music. There were Candau and Mazzantini, dressed like the *écarteurs* of the olden time, in white trousers, white shirt, red sash, and blue *béret.* Others, following the fashion of Spanish toreadors, were more elaborately attired, in vivid colors of red and green, with velvet knee-breeches, white stockings, their bolero jackets and *bérets* brilliant with gold braid. Fourcade was one of these. He carried himself well, thought Colette, who had a seat in the grandstand with her cousin. She was

somewhat excited and squeezed her cousin's hand as she exclaimed:

"*Now,* what do you say! Look at him! He is finer than any!"

They arrived in front of the grandstand, and bowed low, saluting the commission and the judges. Raoul caught Colette's eye. She smiled at him and gayly waved her handkerchief.

III

All was breathless silence. The band retired to its place and the *écarteurs* withdrew to the barriers—all but one, Mazzantini, who stood in the very center of the arena, expectantly facing the stalls. Suddenly, the door of one of them swung open and out rushed the famous cow, Generosa, a lithe, slender beast, her red coat sleek and shiny.

At first she was confused—half blinded by the glare of the sun; the holder of the long rope attached to her horns had just time to hurry to one side out of the way of danger. With a quick, nervous motion of her head, she looked about—abruptly, she espied one of the helpers near the stalls and dashed at him, so that he had to run for his life, leaping over the barrier. Then she made a rush at two *écarteurs* on that side, and they precipitately vaulted over the fence just in time to escape, while the great crowd yelled with derision and laughter.

Her tail lashing, angrily looking this way and that, her eyes sweeping the arena, she trotted back, ready to charge anybody who dared show himself. She pawed the

earth, her head lowered, her nostrils dilating, her eyes rolling. She wheeled around. There, far off, in the center of the arena, she suddenly saw a man. It was Mazzantini. His white clothes made him an easy target. As she looked at him, he raised his arms and leaped high in air, yelling:

"Hoop-té! Generosa! Hoop-té! Hoop-té!"

In the twinkling of an eye, the infuriated animal is rushing forward, gathering crescendos of speed with every step. But Mazzantini—he does not run—no, he remains standing there in the center, absolutely motionless, coolly awaiting her terrific onslaught, his arms lifted, his eyes on her horns. The raging beast lowers her head for the charge—now she is only ten meters away—five meters!—Still he does not move! . . . *Bou Diou!* But he will be killed! A gasp goes up from the great multitude. But, see! When she is so close that only a miracle can save him, a swift bend of the hip, a graceful pivot to the left on one foot, and the cow passes on like a whirlwind, her right horn missing him by an inch!

"Bien! Bien!" the crowd yells, excitedly. "Bravo! Mazzantini! Bravo!" while the band breaks forth, swelling a quick and triumphant staccato over the tumultuous cheering. In the grandstand, the judges turn to each other, smiling.

"A good *écart!* A very good *écart!*" cries Lignac, making the first entry on his score.

Meanwhile the cow abruptly reached the limit of her long rope, whose sudden tug jerked her head in air and nearly threw her. But like a flash, she wheeled about and rushed back. It was another *écarteur,* now—Can-

dau—who awaited her in the center of the arena, throwing up his hands and shouting to her his defiant challenge. This Candau was a surprisingly heavy man—too heavy a man, one would say, to risk his life in this sport which requires preternatural quickness.

The cow was exasperated by her previous failure. She would get this big lump of a man! But, when she was within a scant two meters of his stomach, he turned his side to her, rose on his toes, suddenly shot his whole body forward in an arc, his hands in air, while Generosa's horns just brushed the fringes of his short jacket!

Still, Generosa was not through yet! She had tricks of her own. She had not been charging men all these years in the greatest arenas of Gascony for nothing! Instead of speeding on, as before, she suddenly arrested herself, her hoofs digging into the earth, raising a cloud of dust; swiftly she turned around, and, while Candau was smilingly acknowledging the applause from the grandstand, she dashed at him with redoubled fury. A warning cry went up from a thousand throats. The triumphant strains of the band abruptly ceased. Behind him, Candau heard thundering hoofs. He had no time to look—still less, to face about and make an *écart*. He was caught. There was only one thing that could save him. He started to run for the barriers. But the cow was too close, and Candau too fat to run. He had all of ten meters to go yet. He would never make it! The cow had almost reached him, going at terrific speed. Just as she angrily lowered her horns to hurl her outwitted victim into the air, Candau precipitately threw himself on his face, and the cow, un-

able to stop, leaped over him, and before she could wheel about, Candau was safe over the fence!

Generosa's red coat was no longer sleek and shiny; it was streaked with sweat and foam. Her eyes were bloodshot. Her breath was short. Away, yonder, she saw the door of her stall opening. She trotted briskly across the arena, glad enough of a rest. She was tired. After all, it was only a game! Her day would come yet. She had got her man before, and she would get him again.

So far, the sport had been good, and the multitude was satisfied. Both Mazzantini and Candau had acquitted themselves well. But the crowd likes variety. Shouts were heard here and there—somebody's name was being called—and quickly the whole amphitheatre took it up:

"*A-toi,* Faber! *A-toi,* Faber!"

This Faber must be a popular fellow, to judge by the noise. In response to the call, a lithe, athletic youth with a red velvet jacket steps out from the barriers and bashfully smiles and bows, just as Capitana, a Spanish cow, with horns that point straight in front of her, breaks from the open door of her stall.

"Hoop-té! Capitana! Hoop-té! Hoop-té!" yells Faber in a high, shrill voice, throwing his arms up and down and awaiting her onrush.

Talk about a whirlwind! Heaven pity the man once hit by those long, sword-like horns at that speed! One had better not try too close an *écart* with a cow like that! But Faber is not going to try any *écart* at all. There is another way for which he is famous, and the crowd knows it. When the raging beast has swept forward within two yards of him, he makes a short run

straight toward her, gathers himself together, and suddenly leaps high in air, his legs doubled under him, while the cow races directly beneath him and on, to the other end of the arena!

What cheers! Especially from the children!

Three times Faber does this spectacular feat until the cow, discouraged, weary, is urged back to her *toril.*

The people were getting restless and there was much moving hither and thither. A number of the bolder men left their seats and climbed over the barriers into the arena. They wanted to show that they were dare-devils and not at all afraid. They were a nuisance, and besides it is always dangerous. Far over in the corner of the amphitheatre, some of the *écarteurs* were grouped about the *buvette.* For the first time, Colette, scanning the crowd, espied Max Engel and his fair-haired sister away off at the other end, standing just behind the barriers near the entrance. How different from Raoul Fourcade was Max, with his peaceful face and his rough clothes, so in contrast with his rival's dashing costume of green velvet and gold! All at once, she was startled by yells from the crowd, which was impatient for the sport to begin again:

"Fourcade! Your turn, Fourcade!"

There was much laughter and more shouting of his name, until everybody was calling, "Fourcade! Fourcade!" There were many, especially those who had seen his comings and goings in the village, who had been waiting for this moment. They were wondering what he could do. Most people had their doubts.

Fourcade steps from the front of the *buvette* and advances toward the center. He tries to conduct himself

with careless ease, but, in spite of his attempt at jauntiness, he is painfully conscious of two thousand eyes, and his hand shakes ever so little as he smilingly fingers the ends of his mustache.

Some wag, mindful of the famous hair-cut, calls loudly:

"Boubée! Where's Boubée?"

Other rowdies take up the mocking cry: "Boubée! Here's your customer! Boubée!" High-pitched laughter.

Colette's cheeks burn crimson. Her sense of justice is outraged. As for Fourcade, it is easy to see that he is furiously angry. But he has time only to wither his tormentors with one haughty and defiant look, for already the renowed Pelouquina, a Spanish cow, is being released from her stall.

"I'll show them!" he mutters to himself. He calls to Pelouquina. She sees him. She starts to run at him. On she comes, a streak of red in a flying cloud of tumultuous dust. The crowd rises to its feet. Fourcade is awaiting her—but look at his face! It has no blood in it—it is saffron-yellow, like a sick man's. His popeyes look hither and thither as if for refuge. *Dieu!* Instead of dodging her with that graceful reflection of the hip which he has learned so well, he jumps in a panic away from her path as she passes on! The great audience groans and hisses—but before it can give full vent to its scorn and ridicule, Pelouquina has swung around and is chasing him. But this Fourcade can run—ah, how he can run! He reaches the barrier and scrambles over it in wild disorder, leaving his gold-braided *béret* behind in his ignominious flight.

Cries of derision go up from all parts of the stands until the whole amphitheatre is in an uproar:

"Go hide yourself!"

"Go home!"

"The bed's the place for you!"

It is pitiful. Colette's pretty face is suffused with shame. It is disgrace. But there is better stuff in Fourcade than this, vain swaggerer that he is. He intends to retrieve himself. Even in the midst of their laughter he leaps back over the barrier and to everybody's surprise advances into the center once more. This time, he swears, he will do it. He has done this thing before, and he can do it now. . . . The beast is already charging him again. This time, he firmly stands his ground. Like a flash of lightning she sweeps toward him—past him—one might almost say, through him—amid tumultuous cheering and deafening shouts of "Bravo!"—for Raoul Fourcade, swaggerer and coward, has dodged the cow so close that her left horn has furrowed its stinging way through the very flesh of his side, ripping his short jacket clean away, up to the shoulder!

"A perfect *écart!*" cry the judges to each other. "A brave *écart!*"

It was, indeed, perfect. The most famous *écarteur* could not have done better. No wonder Fourcade's bow to the multitude took on the triumphant gesture of the conscious hero as he realized what he had done. The band was playing madly, and Colette—yes, he dared raise his eyes to Colette, now—she felt almost like the noble ladies of olden days, whose doughty knights battled for their favor at the jousts. For the moment, just for this moment, Raoul was her knight. He had done

this valorous deed for her! If Colette had really lived in the days of chivalry, perhaps she would have been the sort to give herself to him who rode with the boldest lance. Yonder was Max Engel, safe behind the barriers there, a mere spectator, while, right before him, brave deeds were being done. Who could imagine Max Engel doing anything heroic? Colette dismissed the thought with light contempt.

Yet, only half an hour later, Max Engel had actually entered the arena and done a deed far more heroic than dodging the wildest of cows—a deed which would be talked about for generations throughout this part of Gascony, especially—yes, especially—by Colette's own children and grandchildren.

Let Abbé Pierre tell it in his own way—the letter cheered his old friend, the Abbé Rivoire, for a whole afternoon:

"It has been a bad Sunday for me. How can the Church compete with a fête like this? In spite of the presence of the band, the mass was not so well attended as I had hoped, many people remaining outside in the Place, loitering about, looking at the concessions. Then the vespers—they were put a good half hour before the *course,* so people could go to both; but instead, they neglected it and went on to the arena early, afraid of not getting a seat. All day I was bothered by the noises of the crowds going by the house. Why, there was no peace even in my study! The *buvette* across the alley was thronged with people laughing, shouting, singing. Even my Aunt Madeleine was intrigued and actually went to the arena with my father, in spite of my telling him that he was getting too old for such things

"But I must tell you of the very extraordinary thing that occurred at the *course*. It will interest you, I am sure. I got it all from Aunt Madeleine when she came home, so excited that she could hardly talk—which is a rare enough thing for her!

"It appears that toward the end of the *course* they produced their best Spanish cow, by the name of Trompetta—a beautiful brute, of a rich Titian color, with a white star on her forehead. When I tell you that she had no *tampons* to protect the ends of her sharp horns, and no *corde*, either, and was just let out, wild, into the arena, you can readily perceive how dangerous she was. Of course, nobody would dare to do anything with her except Bras-de-fer, who had been saved to the last to make one of his famous *écarts*, the one where he stands on his *béret*, from which he must not move, while the cow makes her charge—just like Jean Chicoy, who was all the rage in these parts seventy-five years ago.

"Let me tell you about this *écart*. It is done by awaiting the onrush of the cow, the arms folded, standing absolutely motionless, steadily regarding the eyes of the on-coming beast until her head is lowered for the final charge. Then, when this living avalanche is within two yards of his chest, the *écarteur* makes a feint by bending to one side, which throws the cow off the straight line. Then, just as she is at him, with elegant suppleness and inconceivable quickness, he bends to the other side, still without moving his feet—and the deceived animal stampedes by amid the noisy ovations of the crowd.

"Well, Bras-de-fer did exceptionally well at this dif-

ficult feat; but, now, listen to the sequel! The people were still standing and excitedly yelling and even throwing their hats into the arena, amid the wild playing of the band, when the cow, maddened by her failure —and without any rope, remember—made a sudden dash at some people standing just within the barriers, where they certainly ought not to have been. They scrambled over to the safe side in a hurry, I can tell you!—yes, Aunt Madeleine has repeated it to me often enough, so that I can now see it as if I had been there. Now, mark you, that was near the entrance, where the barrier is more flimsy than anywhere else, being only four bars, instead of a solid fence. As the cow hurled herself violently against these bars, she loosened one of them—and now she was trying to get through at the people standing there, their backs to the closed entrance, caught there in a veritable trap between the high tiers of seats on either side of them. There were people there whom everybody knew. There was Cazac, the guardian of the forest; Claverie, the village crier; Marinette's son, Emile; the postman; Bruhac, the carpenter; old Hippolyte Caussade, the retired teacher; and many others whose names I do not remember. Everybody saw the terrific danger if the frenzied animal ever succeeded in reaching them. All the *écarteurs* ran in disorder about the arena, shrilly yelling to her to attract her attention elsewhere; the acolytes at the stalls threw up their hats and shouted to her; one of the drivers dashed upon her and prodded her with his stick, and the *teneur de corde* ran as fast as he could with the rope in his hands, hoping somehow to fasten it over her horns. But before anybody could do anything, she had

torn the loosened bar utterly away and was charging furiously at the helpless people, now absolutely at her mercy. A gasp of indescribable horror went up from all sides. Some one tried to wrench open the entrance gates to afford a means of escape, but they stuck. Then, all at once, when you would not have given a burnt match for the lives of all these people, a man—a stupendous Hercule of a man—leaped right in front of the raging beast and with his bare hands caught her by the horns! With both hands he grasped the horns, one in each hand, while the brute lunged at his stomach with all her furious might. Still he held her, desperately keeping the sharp ends of her horns from him, though they brushed his shirt and ripped it to tatters and drew blood from his flesh—still he held her, wrestling mightily with the huge beast like a modern Ursus, his veins bursting, his eyes bloodshot . . . until the gates just back of him were at last got open and the people crowded out in a panic to safety, and the *teneur de corde* came up with the rope and securely fastened her. Then he collapsed to the earth and did not hear the greatest ovation any man ever received in a Gascon arena, even in the palmiest days of the celebrated Chicoy, or Guerrita, or Daverat. They shouted his name, 'Engel! Max Engel!' in a delirium. They—everybody—came down from their seats and surged toward him and would have crushed him to death with their congratulations, if the little doctor, who had rushed over, had not already seen to it that he was speedily carried out of the gates, by now regaining consciousness, and in his own Peugeot taken him off with his sister to his home.

"Well, there you have it as my Aunt Madeleine tells it; only, she puts more detail into it and probably exaggerates it more than I do. She has a lot to say, too, about a great *écart* made earlier in the *course* by one of our local young men by the name of Fourcade. But I wasn't much interested in that. It may have been heroic enough, as my Aunt Madeleine insists; but, as you well know, there are two kinds of heroism: the selfish, spectacular kind, that is all for glory; and the other kind that comes to light when a crisis calls for a brave man. . . . I must get better acquainted with this Max Engel. Even although he is a foreigner—a Swiss, I am told—we, of this part of France, who, I hope, are not unnoted for valor, are always thrilled by brave deeds, even though they are done by those who are not fortunate enough to call themselves Gascons. . . ."

Now, that night, the very night of the *course,* when it began to be dark, throngs of people were streaming toward the market-place, for the grand open-air concert and dance. All across the long front of the *mairie,* yes, and on the *gendarmerie* on the other side, were strung rows of gorgeous paper lanterns, not to speak of the "R.F." over the *mairie* entrance in letters made with flaring lights of blue, white and red, contrived with colored glasses containing oil wicks. Sky-rockets flashed up and burst high overhead, momentarily revealing the church tower—a grotesque phantom in a chiaroscuro—rising out of darkness and dying into darkness. The band was seated in the arcades along the *mairie,* whose walls echoed the lively music, making a delightful din. Courrou, as usual, made the most noise of all with his cornet, into which he blew with all his might, while the

chubby Sarrade stood out in front, energetically wielding his baton, his straw hat tipped far back on his head, his round face red with his exertions. People promenaded about in groups. Confetti battles raged here and there among the younger people, amid much shouting and laughter. Little knots of older people were still discussing with animation the extraordinary feat of Max Engel, who was nowhere to be seen. Raoul Fourcade, proud as a chanticleer, conspiculously swaggered about with Colette and Yvonne, triumph written all over his smug face. Certainly, he was to be pardoned, for many admiring glances were cast his way. But two of the other *écarteurs*—Cantegrit and Candau—who were seated in front of the café drinking, and who saw him passing by, shrugged their shoulders contemptuously. Said Candau:

"That one! There is nobody as important as he! Look at him!"

"Bah! It was all an accident."

"Still, that second *écart* . . ."

"It was nothing, I tell you! He would have run away again, only he was frozen stiff with fright and couldn't move. How the cow missed him, I don't understand."

"It must have been just chance. You are right."

"But certainly! Ha! He was more surprised than anybody else, you can well believe! *Sapristi!* How the women look at him!"

But Raoul and Colette, happily unconscious of these disparaging remarks, passed on, over toward the band, where the crowd was thickest.

Some of those watching this handsome couple closely enough might have noticed that Colette's manner was

not all that was to be expected of a girl in love, permitted to exhibit her hero in public. She was pale; more than that, she was listless. When Fourcade addressed her, she seemed to be only half listening. Indeed, her adorable eyes, instead of gazing up into his, looked about restlessly; and her adorable lips, instead of answering his fatuous smiles, were pathetic. An explanation of her abstraction from the gayety about her might have been found in the fact that, just after supper, she had invented a hasty errand to the pharmacist, where she had pumped his wife for news about Max Engel, on the chance that medicine had been sent him. The pharmacist's wife told all she knew: Yes, Max's sister had been there earlier in the evening for some antiseptic and bandages. The sister reported that her brother laughed at his injuries of the afternoon, saying they were nothing except a few bruises, and that he would come out that night and join the festivities in the Place.

So it was that Colette's eyes were everywhere but on her escort. And the pathetic lines of her mouth bespoke the fact that no matter where she looked, she could not find what she sought.

All at once, the band struck up a quadrille, and the dancing began. A great open space was cleared in front of the *mairie*, and four couples started things going, among them, old Bajac, the butcher, who, in spite of his age and bulk, danced better than any of them, introducing the elaborate steps of the elder day, and throwing out his feet vigorously whenever he advanced from his partner to the front of the opposite couple.

Raoul had tried to persuade Colette to join in this dance, but, to his surprise, she, who loved dancing, had

excused herself, saying that she was not feeling well and did not care to dance to-night. And now, when the quadrille was over, and the band was getting ready for another dance, she still refused; so Raoul seized Yvonne and pulled her out to join the string of young people forming in a semicircle, holding hands, while the band struck up a lively rondo, which Raoul led, weaving right and left, forward and back, with the boisterous rhythm of vehement feet.

In the meantime, Colette moved back from the crowd into the shadows at the end of the *mairie*. She stood there, a little apart from the rest, with a strange desire to be alone—for she had found her heart at last, with all the sweet pain that comes with the finding. What if Max was a foreigner? She was through with playing. She had known it from the first. She had always known it. Standing there alone, unnoticed by the throng, she suddenly felt a touch on her arm, and a voice—very gentle and a little shy, as it always was when he dared to address her:

"Colette!"

She thrilled at the sound and slowly turned about and looked up into his face, dim in the shadows—his honest face, in whose eyes she tried to read what she had read there several times before. She sighed happily and turned away. She was no longer pale and the pathetic droop of her lips was gone. Then the maternal in her spoke anxiously:

"Max! Were you badly hurt?"

"But no, Colette. It was nothing at all. . . . Oh, my arms are a little sore, but,"—he laughed and became bolder—"one does not dance with one's arms!" And,

taking her by the hand, he hurried her through the crowd to the open space and swung out with her to the opening strains of a waltz.

It was wonderful how people suddenly crowded about from all parts of the Place to watch this, the hero of their great day—the first time they had seen him since that superhuman feat which had saved the lives of many who stood there. Fourcade was forgotten. His famous *écart* faded into insignificance. How fine this Max Engel looked, his *béret* on one side of his head, revealing his curly, blond hair, his body made like a god's—they had never thought of it before, but what a couple, what a couple! And how well they danced together! Two by two the other dancers withdrew to the sides until only Max and Colette were left.

"They play it too fast," he remarked to Colette. "In my country . . ."

Colette nods. As they pass by Sarrade, the leader of the band, she says to him:

"Plus lentement! Plus lentement!"

And now, the villagers never saw a waltz danced like this. As the music slowed up, they witnessed for the first time a waltz danced not jerkily, with jumps and hops and abrupt turns, two steps instead of three, as they themselves did it; no, they saw these two dance it with a gliding movement, their feet making a poem to the music, their forms floating lightly over the ground, weaving their steps into the graceful pattern of a dream. Fourcade had at first stood with the others and looked on, nonplused, then exceedingly angry, his vanity wounded, goading him to some rash deed. At last, he could stand it no more. It was too much! He clenched

his fists, melted into the crowd, muttering to himself, and disappeared. Later, he was seen drinking heavily at the Café Dumeste. Still later, some one passed him steering unsteadily down the road toward Fromentas, drunk as Robespierre's she-ass.

All of which makes it easier to understand why, in future years, Max's deed will be talked about especially by Colette's children and grandchildren.

IX

ON THE WAY TO THE FOREST

Among those who came near to being gored by the mad cow in the arena and who owed their lives to the heroism of the big Swiss, was one Hippolyte Caussade. Although a native of Aignan, he had been absent for many years, and had only recently returned. When he first went away, it was to attend the normal school over in Auch. Later, he taught in a communal school out in the country. Finally, he had the happy chance to devote his whole time to the kind of work he loved, as secretary of a society which made researches into the ancient lore of Gascony. Hippolyte's greatest ambition was to write a book of his own before he died—a book that should celebrate this, his own village, which, he kept saying, the historians had shamefully neglected.

In the old days, he and Pierre Clément—now the Abbé Pierre Clément—had been boys together. Hippolyte still owned the house in which he was born—his maiden sister, Amélie, had lived in it all these years—a house almost across from the Abbé's, at the beginning of the road leading from the Back Street out into the country. So, after a lifetime of separation, these old playmates were actually neighbors again! Already they had visited back and forth, reviving precious memories, little by little resurrecting to the miracle of life the days long buried in the shadows of forgetfulness.

Hippolyte's hair was thin and gray now—its long strands hung down over his ears and the back of his neck. The tight-drawn skin of his face was waxy, with a slight roseate tinge where it stretched over his prominent cheek bones. He was of small stature, with narrow shoulders and the body of a boy—and the eyes of a boy alone with his thoughts. When he spoke, one was surprised by his deep, sonorous voice—a voice one associates with a man of physical and mental power. He was always soberly and neatly dressed. Above his black, shiny shoes, one caught a glimpse of socks immaculately white. His hands were small and reminded one of a woman's—so slender they were and delicate. All in all, one had the impression that, given the chance, he might have become a scholar or a minor poet. The truth was he had actually written poetry, which, however, no one but his sister had ever seen.

One sunny afternoon the Abbé started out to visit some sick people in the country. He decided to take his horse and cart, and was about to open the door of the stable when Hippolyte hailed him.

"I was just coming over to call on you," he said. "No matter. Some other time."

"If you've nothing else to do, you might go with me." The Abbé had the door open now, and was reaching up for the harness that hung on its nail. The high, two-wheeled cart was just visible in the shadows.

"Thank you, Pierre. But to tell you the truth—well—I have not been the same since the other day when we drove to Sabazan. Your cart is an excellent one; but riding in these carts always upsets me."

"But Poule here is very careful. Perhaps I drove

her too fast the other day. We'll go slowly this time."

"If I had your horse, I wouldn't name her after so dilatory a bird as a hen. But it isn't that. If it was just the jolting, I wouldn't mind. But these two-wheeled carts make complicated motions in too many directions at the same time—and my stomach isn't what it was once."

The Abbé hesitated, the harness over his arm. Slowly he reached up and placed it back on its nail.

"Well, it isn't far. Suppose we walk. The fact is I don't walk enough since I got this cart. I am going up to the Bruhac house first, and then back by the forest road to the 'monastery'—Cazenave's place."

Hippolyte's face brightened at once. Then he became doubtful:

"But that is really a long walk. Won't it make you late for evening prayer?"

"You forget that June was over yesterday; consequently, there is no service."

The Abbé closed the door of his shed and the two moved on toward the Road of the Madonna. Just at the corner, they came upon young Georges Lagarde, headed for his father's store. He lifted his hat respectfully. Said the Abbé:

"You will notice that our Georges is very happy these days."

"I was at the wedding. Élise is a fine woman. He is very lucky. I had not seen her since she was a tiny girl."

"There is to be another wedding soon. Perhaps you have heard."

"Another wedding? Who?"

"It is no secret. You know Colette Roziès, she who runs the grain store?"

"Roziès? Roziès? But Abel Roziès had no daughter."

"She isn't his daughter. His niece."

"Oh, yes, yes, yes! I remember. Jules' girl. Now I remember. Of course!"

"She is to marry a foreigner, who came here about a year ago. A Swiss. Max Engel is his name. Since the famous fête, everybody is singing his praises."

Hippolyte stopped in the middle of the road. It was one of his mannerisms that he could never walk and talk at one and the same time.

"Ah! You forget I was there. As you know, I was one of those caught in that trap by the gates. The cow was actually that near me—so!—when this Monsieur Engel rushed in and grabbed her by the horns. It was a miracle!"

They resumed their walk. Already they had passed the church and the cemetery and the Abbé's vineyard with its garden house, and were now dipping down the hollow at the bottom of which was the laundry pool. The Abbé was thinking of the time when he, too, attended *courses*—how exciting they were!—long before he had gone to the seminary to study for priestly orders. A reminiscent smile lit up his kindly face.

"Do you recollect the *course* over at Fromentas when we were boys? You and I walked over. It was in August. I know that because their patron saint is St. Dominique, and it was his fête-day. After vespers, they had the procession to the cemetery, then the *course* on the dancing green by the church. It was the first I had ever seen."

"I recall it. Yes, yes! They had no arena. They made a circle of ox-carts for the game, and people sat on them." Hippolyte stopped short in his tracks again. "The *maire* and his wife sat on the largest ox-cart in two chairs—is it not so?"

"The chairs were brought from a house near by. And they had young bulls instead of cows, as in the *course provençale,* and anybody could go into the arena and try his luck."

"Wait! You have it wrong. You say there were no cows. But there was one cow." Hippolyte considered. "I can see her very well. She had only one horn, so everybody was dodging her on the safe side."

"You're right, you're right! She escaped. I remember she ran between the ox-carts and got clean away. They didn't catch her, either. She trotted as fast as she could down the road toward Aignan, and they didn't find her until the next day—in the Sance vineyard." The Abbé sighed. "I had actually forgotten these things until now. . . . Those were happy times for you and me, Hippolyte!"

As the two men neared the bottom of the hollow, they heard a babble of voices, punctuated by the energetic slap-slap of wet clothes on the shelf of stones by the laundry pool. They looked up, and, over a low, stone wall, saw half a dozen women doing their washing. There was the wife of Bajac, the butcher, and that of Claverie, the village crier, and the postman's wife; and there was old Marinette, too, and Sidonie, the seamstress, and the wife of the janitor of the *mairie.* All of them ceased their chatter when they saw the Abbé come to a stop in the road, and greeted him and

Monsieur Caussade with a chorus of pleasant *"Bonjours."* The Abbé pointed to the shelter running along two sides of the pool, neatly roofed with red tile.

"They have improved things since you were here last. Our mayor deserves much credit. They change the water twice a week, now."

"In my day, the women didn't have a nice high shelf of stone like that to rub and slap their clothes on. They used boards. They had to stoop over. It was hard work."

As the two began to climb up the other side of the hollow, the gabble of the women began to be heard again. Hippolyte laughed:

"There is one thing that remains the same: no doubt the laundry is still the best place for the latest gossip. They're probably saying all kinds of things about you and me this minute. I tell you, Pierre, my ear burns."

"I know every one of them. They are all good women. They mean well."

Soon they came to a narrow lane that ran off from the right of the road. Up from this lane sloped a large meadow, on the crest of which stood a two-story house with a barn attached. In one part of the meadow, cows were grazing contentedly; and on the farther side, turkeys were strutting about, opening and shutting their fan-like tails and making a great to-do with their gobble-gobble-gobble. As they neared the house, they noticed a great stack of hay in the barnyard, from the midst of which rose a tall pole, crowned with a huge earthen pot, upside down. Hippolyte stood still and pointed at it:

"That pot up there reminds one of how hard it is to find a reason for the most ordinary things. Why, for

instance, do our peasants crown their hay poles with an inverted water pot like that?"

"I have always heard that it was to keep the lightning away."

"There you are! Now, I had always heard that it was to prevent the rotting of the poles by the rain. . . . Ah! You saw that bird that just flew from under the pot? That bird, I think, is the real reason."

"What do you mean? How could that be any reason at all?"

"Well, you must admit that those pots are excellent places for nests; and where the sparrows build, there is good luck. And where there is good luck, there is no lightning, or rot, either—so, at last, you get at the one reason that includes all the others!"

The Abbé laughed softly.

"No," he answered. "The one reason behind all else would reveal to us why the nesting of sparrows should bring good fortune."

"You are wrong, Pierre; there *is* no reason for that! So, we must look for none." Hippolyte looked slyly at the Abbé. "You yourself admit that there is a place where reason stops—you, who are a theologian."

"I am also a priest, whose duty at the present moment is to visit at this house. I hope the little girl is better. Will you go in with me?"

"No. I shall wait here, if you don't mind."

The Abbé entered the gate, strode across the hard clay of the yard, and, after a moment, disappeared through the open door. The sun was warm, so Hippolyte looked about for a shady place, and, seeing a large chestnut tree across the road, sat down under it, his

back against the generous trunk. He took off his *béret,* mopped his brow with his handkerchief and brushed back his thin gray hair with his fingers. His *béret* had not been much protection against the sun; but he liked to wear it because it was the headgear of the south, and he loved to keep close to the good old Gascon customs. Over in the vineyard back of the house, he saw a man plowing. It was Michel Bruhac. His little girl, Renée, was the one who was sick. Hippolyte could hear him, shouting to his oxen:

"Ha! Lauret! *Doucement! Doucement!* Mulet! Ha! *Arrè! Arrè!*"

Suddenly his wife appeared in the yard, and, going to the end of the barn, lustily called to him to come into the house.

After awhile, the silence was broken by the rattle of an ox-cart descending the road from the direction of the forest. As it drew near, one could hear singing. Soon, around a bend of the road, the driver, an old man, came into view, walking along in front of his oxen, his long goad in his hand, cord-soled shoes on his feet, his sabots hung high on the poles of his cart. He passed Hippolyte without noticing him under his tree, singing snatches of the old patois ditty that begins, *Digo Janette, bos te tu louga ri reto. . . .*

Tell me, Janette, will you hire yourself out?
No, Mother, I want to get married
To a fiddler who will make me dance!

Down the hollow vanished the cart, the singing ending

in a long-sustained minor, becoming gradually lost in the rattle of the wheels which, in turn, died over the brow of the next hill.

"My grandmother sang it!" mused Hippolyte. "My grandmother sang it—that same song! I never expected to hear it again! When a few more old men are gone, the old songs will be sung no more, and the Gascon tongue will be dead. A thousand pities!"

There is no knowing to what length Hippolyte's disconsolate musings would have gone had they not been broken by the appearance of the Abbé.

"The girl is better. The little doctor was here this morning. She is out of danger. It is good news! . . . But you"—the Abbé regarded the dejection of his friend—"perhaps the walk has been too much; shall we turn back?"

"No, Pierre; my body is all right; it is my soul that is afflicted. I have been thinking. The result is, I am going to gather together all these old Gascon songs that are so rapidly disappearing. The *Société Archéologique* should have seen to it long ago."

"My next call is at the 'monastery.' We can go up to the forest, and then down by the other road. . . . Our old friend, Marius Fontan, could have helped you with those songs, but, alas, he is dead now. He left me all his manuscripts, though. Perhaps you will find something there."

Hippolyte shook his head doubtfully.

"There is one great trouble. One might write the words but one could never record the music. Why? It has quarter-tones which our scale does not recognize at all. No, there are very precious things in our world

that are destined to be lost forever, and there is no help for it—they are gone, gone, gone!"

The two old friends were silent for a long time. They plodded up the hill. The road was becoming steeper and steeper. They were close to the edge of the forest that topped a long ridge of hills. Wild gorse, with its yellow blossoms and prickly thorns, covered the fields on both sides of the road. Away to the right, where was the charcoal burner's hut, a spiral of blue smoke lazily curled upward. A buzzard swept across the sky and circled over the valley, looking for its prey. Five minutes later, they entered into the grateful shade of spreading oaks. Hippolyte's spirits revived. He bent low over a cluster of yellow flowers and arose clutching a leaf which he held up for the Abbé to see. There was mild excitement in his eyes.

"Do you know what this is?" he demanded.

The Abbé examined the leaf a moment.

"Why, it's 'golden button.' I supposed you knew. It's fairly common up here."

Hippolyte looked disappointed.

"Regard it carefully. No, let me hold it off, like this! Did you ever see the print of the foot of a wolf? No? Well, when I was a boy, we were taught to call this flower 'wolf's-foot.' I forget the patois name for it; but that's what it meant." Hippolyte threw the leaf away and sighed. "There were no wolves in the forest in my time. But my grandfather was in that famous hunt which exterminated the last one nearly a hundred years ago. . . . But, although I have never seen a wolf, I once saw a *loup-garou* when I was a child."

"You saw one?" The Abbé looked incredulous.

"Yes. It was at the edge of the forest. We children had wandered up here in our play. It got dark before we knew it. I could see the *loup-garou* as easy as I could see anything. It was an enormous creature, half man and half wolf. Its eyes gleamed like red fire and its hair stood up all over its back, and its huge, sharp teeth were bared. We children ran screaming down through the gorse toward the village as fast as we could. That was the only time, though."

"Of course you know better, now."

"M-m-m! I am not sure, Pierre; I am not sure."

They were walking under the forest trees along a shady wood-road in order to reach the path that would take them back down the hill toward the house called the "monastery," where the Abbé had yet to make a call. All at once they emerged upon a sunny clearing, in which were stacked neat piles of firewood, all of exactly the same size, and marked with numbers. Each pile belonged to some family in the commune, assigned by lot, so that no one could complain if his neighbor's wood was a little better. No one had to pay for the wood; it was a free gift; all one had to do was to haul it. Hippolyte was wandering in and out among the piles. He stopped.

"This is mine. Our village ought to be grateful to the d'Armagnac who presented us this forest."

"That reminds me. This month our council attends the annual mass to commemorate that gift, in spite of the fact it was so many hundreds of years ago."

"The Counts of Armagnac made history. And to think that one of their castles still stands in our village, empty and neglected! . . . Actually, Pierre, I have

never been inside. Yet, I have long had in mind to write a history of our village with the Armagnac house as the center. I must get at it soon. The world has never heard of us because we are off the railways and the main roads. But we shall see! We shall see!"

The afternoon was waning. The road now led along the very edge of the forest. Between the trees they could look far down across the valley, in the midst of which was the village, the rugged tower of the church rising above the red tile roofs. All along the valley, the little farms, outlined by hedges, made a crazy quilt of the landscape. A country of many farms, like that, means many charming lanes; and as the Abbé looked down he thought of the times when he had traveled those lanes as a boy. Why, yonder, was the lane that led to the old wood back of the Sance house, one of his favorite haunts; and there, to the east of the village, was a lane he well remembered, leading down to a spring and bordered with daisies and wild roses. He saw himself, a boy of fourteen, in his black smock and blue *béret*, rambling down that grass-grown lane with a little girl, his little finger lightly linked in hers—Geneviève, her name was, Geneviève Caussade, a distant cousin of the very man who now walked by his side. Later, she had had a sacred place in his heart; but there came an end of it all, when he went away to Toulouse to study for holy orders. Those tall cypress trees down there to the right by the church—she was beneath them, now, sleeping the long sleep. It was his money sent through the Abbé Rivoire "from a friend" that had paid for the modest stone at her head. Her head! What beautiful, jet-black hair she had! . . . The Abbé absently reached

down and plucked a hardy stem of the prickly gorse.

"There is a way," the Abbé said to himself, "to handle even gorse so that it will not sting. You grasp it gently, moving the hand toward the tip of the stem; then you grip it firmly, and it does not harm you. No, it has no power to harm you then, if only you can grasp it firmly!"

"What is the matter?" asked Hippolyte. "You made a sound as if something hurt you."

"I? Ah, no . . . it was only the gorse. One of the thorns pricked my finger. It is nothing!" And the Abbé cast the spray to one side.

They had at length come to the road that they sought, leading back down the hill to the village. Here they came to a halt and looked about. Straight ahead of them, leading on through the forest, the road on which they had come continued, abandoned and desolate. It was sunken and scarred with deep ruts in which were puddles of dirty water. It was overgrown in places with rank weeds and grasses, and was bordered by high banks, riotous with a tangle of junipers, and hawthorn, and briars, and heather.

"It winds around and meets the highway to Averon," remarked the Abbé. "As you know, it is called 'The Monk's Road.'"

"The Monk's Road! . . . the Monk's Road! . . . I remember we used to call one of these roads that; but I never knew why. There were all sorts of legends. . . ."

"I think I can tell you," responded the Abbé. "At least, Marius Fontan once told me a story about it. Listen!"

Leisurely, they sat themselves down on a grassy knoll

at the edge of the forest, overlooking the valley, now dappled with long shadows. In the distance, they could hear the faint shouts of some woodmen urging their oxen over a hill to their right; for one fleet moment, both oxen and men were vividly outlined against the orange ball of the setting sun. Hippolyte pointed to it; but the Abbé's eyes were fixed upon the gable of an old farmhouse showing through the trees part way down toward the village, and he seemed lost to all about him.

After a few minutes' silence, he cleared his throat and began the story of the Monk's Road, a tale of a comely daughter of Gascony, whose lover became an Abbot.

X

THE MONK'S ROAD

"That house down there where Jean Cazenave lives—you see how dilapidated it looks. The roof, once red, is mellowed with lichens and sags badly; the plaster is cracked, and great patches of it have fallen off. The trunk of the grapevine that grows up over the door is so old that it is as thick as your arm.

"I do not know how ancient the house really is. It is certain that it was there over a hundred years ago, because at the time of the last great wolf-hunt you mentioned, a peasant living there climbed a tree and imitated the howl of a wolf so well that the wolves came from all parts of the forest at his call.

"But what is a hundred years? Long, long before that house was built, a monastery stood on the very spot, so that to this day, as you well know, the place is called the 'monjeau,' which is patois for 'monastery.' Now, our friend Marius, who knew more about these things than anybody else, says that the monastery was founded by a monk by the name of Elysias, as far back as the year 591. That would be over thirteen centuries ago!—but it sounds reasonable enough, because at that time the blessed St. Benoît had already established his famous order, and his disciples were building their retreats in just such wild places as this was, so that they might seclude themselves from the contamination of the

world. No doubt, the solitude here reminded them of the lonely cave of St. Benoît, and helped them to emulate his holy life.

"Thus it was that here, amid a wilderness of gorse, by the edge of our forest, the monks came and erected their house—surely a very simple one, for in the beginning, they eschewed all ostentation, and deemed that a holy life and arduous labor glorified God far more than elaborate walls and lofty towers."

"They must have used the stone from that quarry yonder—that is, if the tale is true."

"Quite likely. . . . Well, shortly afterwards, farther down this hill, arose a group of thatched cottages. They were the early beginnings of our village—at least, so Marius says—and you might as well believe him as any one. One likes to imagine the people of the tiny hamlet looking up toward the monastery on its hill here. They saw the monks, clad in their black gowns, toiling in the fields and vineyards seven hours a day, silent but for the faint sound of their hoes and scythes, which was their hymn of praise to the good God; and they could hear, at evening, the stalwart chants of the choral service, wafted down like the music of some heavenly choir. Certain it is that the fame of the monks went abroad, and splendid reports were spread of these, God's companions and friends, who lived and worked for His glory.

"Slowly the years went by—decades—generations—centuries—and still the monastery thrived and the village spread down the hill. Then there came a time when history wrote itself in this quiet valley with letters of blood. Pillaged and sacked and partly destroyed by the

Saracens, the village and monastery arose from their ruins more flourishing than ever, under the protection of the doughty Counts of Armagnac, who built the castle, a portion of which still stands in our Street of the Church. It was these Counts of Armagnac, too, who surrounded the village with high walls of defense. And still the monks prayed and sang and labored on their hill; for this monastery, unlike many others, did not become rich and slothful—no, the monks continued to extol in their daily lives the blessed virtue of poverty, well aware that through labor alone is the heart kept pure and the mind made worthy of wisdom."

Here Hippolyte impatiently interposed, saying, "I swear I could never see anything in what you priests call the blessed virtues of poverty. It's cant. I've been poor all my life, so I know!"

The Abbé looked at his old playmate soberly:

"And yet, Hippolyte, I see the virtue of poverty glorified even in you. It has made you turn to the things of the mind."

"Perhaps. Oh, yes, perhaps. . . . Pardon me, Pierre; go on with your story."

"Well, for as many as eight hundred seasons the monks had watched the gorse put forth its tiny blossoms of yellow on this hill where you and I are now seated. In the meantime, our little village had become the capital of Armagnac, and the old castle down there —think of it in its glory, when, in 1370, Jean II, who was Count then, received there the homage of all the lords hereabouts—the lords of Thermes, and Izotges, and Lupiac, and Margouet-Meymes, and Lartigue, and Seailles, and St. Go, and Aignan itself! Then and there,

he signed a charter defining his rights and obligations toward them, and confirmed their fiefs. You won't find it in any of our histories; but among the curious papers of our friend, Marius, I actually discovered a faded copy of the very oath to which the Count swore that famous day. It sounds quaint to us now:

> In the name of the Lord, I, Jean II, Lord Suzerain, Count of Armagnac, swear on the four Holy Gospels to maintain my said vassals in the fiefs which have been ceded them forever, to reward them for their services, and to grant them in all circumstances aid and protection, and to be to them a kind, just, and loyal suzerain . . .

That's the way it starts. Sometime I'll show it to you.

"A few years later—it was the year 1379—the great event happened. It was in the springtime. The people of these valleys had been talking about it for weeks—the approaching marriage of Beatrix, the beautiful daughter of this same Count of Armagnac, with the famous Count of Foix, lord of the neighboring region to the west. To tell the truth, everybody was glad, because the people had suffered much from the savage wars between the two houses, and this marriage promised to put an end at last to the ancient rivalry."

At this point in the tale, Hippolyte, who had been shaking his head, made bold to interrupt again:

"Are you certain it was the Count of Foix? That would be Gaston III. I thought it was not he, but his son that Beatrix married! I am sure it was his son!"

"I cannot say. I can only tell you the tale as Marius

tells it. After all, it doesn't much matter to the story."

"Well," said Hippolyte, doubtfully. "Proceed."

"As I say, it was in the springtime—to be exact, the thirteenth of April, the day before Palm Sunday—when a little after noon the Count left Aignan with an imposing procession. There was his daughter, Beatrix, the bride-to-be, and a numerous escort of maids of honor, and pages, as well as noble ladies mounted on mares magnificently caparisoned, and lords of rank—dukes, counts, barons and knights. The procession left the castle, crossed by the side of what is now our market-place, but then occupied by the building of the drapers and weavers, left the village by the Lower Gate, thundered over the drawbridge that spanned the moat, then gracefully swept out the road that leads westward to Barcelonne-sur-Adour. There the wedding took place in a house made of wood and built in haste for the occasion on the bank of the Adour river, exactly on the border line of the counties of Foix and Armagnac.

"It is said that never was such a marriage feast. And certainly the country of Armagnac had never boasted of a comelier young maiden than Beatrix, even among its nobles. On this, her wedding night, seated at the head of the great table, between her father and the bridegroom, she looked more like an angel—verily, more like an angel—than a girl of flesh and blood. Perhaps this was because there was an unaccustomed pallor in her face—a pallor accentuated by her black hair and her great black eyes, deep as night. Strange, but her eyes, instead of resting upon the bridegroom, still a handsome man, in spite of his years, moved about the room as if seeking for something or some one she could

not find. She laughed less than usual—she, *'la gaie armagnageoise,'* who was wont to laugh much—and when her lover in his happy ardor leaned over and whispered something in her ear, her smile was unhappy. Once, when a door was heard to slam, the glass of wine she was lifting to her lips fell from her fingers to the floor and was shattered.

"But all the guests were so occupied with their eating and drinking and were making merry so wholeheartedly, and there was such jesting and crossing of wits and shouting and laughter that no one noticed anything about the bride except that she was as beautiful as ever, and more desirable. Many a young lord there, who had once dared to hope for her favor, looked with envy at the fortunate bridegroom, and then gazed at the bride with such eyes as a traveler despairingly lifts to inaccessible peaks. Things were said about her among the company—pretty, foolish things, such as:

" 'Her eyes—they are as clear as the water in a spring!'

" 'I have seen her when her cheeks had the color of red roses; but she is pale to-night.'

" 'She resembles nothing so much as a lily—a white lily!'

"She became paler still when the sweet, fresh voices of the maids of honor and the pages sang the traditional 'Song of the Bride' in the good old Gascon tongue:

Our bride walks with a light step,
Like a bird on an orange tree.
Yet is our bride heavy-hearted;
She fears.

When to-night she screams out,
The oxen will bellow in the stable,
The cat will yowl on the roof,
And the big rooster will crow.

Drink a toast! It is without stint
That our bride pays us all this!
In her honor let us all drink—
Let us toast the young couple!

"The cause of the bride's listlessness and the reason why her big black eyes seemed ever looking for what they, alas, could not discover, was the absence of the dashing young Baron of Marciac. The other three Barons of the county of Armagnac—there they were, making merry with the rest: the silly Baron of Montesquieu, the brave Baron of Condom, and the wise old Baron of Barcelonne; but where was Henri, the Baron of Marciac, the youngest and bravest and best of them all? And why was the bride so concerned at his absence? He had started with the rest of the procession from Aignan—she had seen him on his prancing black horse, attended by several valiant men-at-arms, as they all had turned west on the road just beyond Thermes; but from there on, she had not espied him again. She would have inquired of her father, but she dared not. Had he not forbidden the young Baron's name to be mentioned again after that terrible time when, defying his amazement and anger, she had revealed the true state of her heart? Ah, this detestable marriage, which bargained her body and soul for an ignominious peace, and tore her from the one man she could ever love!

"As the feast proceeded, there were others who wondered what had become of the redoubtable Henri. There were a few who remembered that, at the little hamlet of St. Germé, he had dismounted at the side of the road, alleging that the girth of his saddle was awry; and it was assumed that he would rejoin the procession speedily. It now appeared, however, that, from that time on, he had been seen no more. Before the night was over, wonder at his long delay had turned to conjecture, and conjecture to fear for his safety. Still, he had his men with him. . . . All the same, it was inexplicable.

"Now, the fact was, there had been nothing whatever the matter with the accouterments of the Baron of Marciac's horse. When the procession had disappeared over a rise in the road, he had slowly raised himself to his saddle again, and, turning his horse about, had surprised his men by ordering them to go before him and return home to Marciac by the way of Plaisance. As for himself, he said, he would follow at his leisure. And surely it was with more than leisure that this ordinarily intrepid rider allowed his horse to walk along the quiet highway, her shadow lengthening in front of her as the afternoon waned. The reins hung loose over her glossy neck, her rider's head was bowed, his brow corrugated with thought, in his eyes a tragic despair pitiful to see and near to madness.

" 'She, who was to me the sum of all purity and of all high things in earth and heaven! She, who pledged me with her own lips—the same lips that foreswear her soul to-night! Bah!'

"Thus ran the young man's thoughts, with many things even more bitter, and which, in his eyes, amply

justified him for turning his horse back homeward. He should not have come in the first place; there are limits to human endurance—to see her there at the head of the procession, riding by her father, a thing to be bartered—an article of commerce, with 20,000 livres thrown in for a dowry, to make the bargain palatable to a man not worthy to draw his breath in the same world with her! . . . This Count of Foix, already long past middle age, whose adventures with women were notorious; violent, greedy, steeped in debauchery, the ancient enemy of the house of Armagnac which he, Henri, had served so faithfully—ah, how he hated the devilishly handsome face of this lord of Foix and the blond hair of him that made his fatuous admirers call him 'Phoebus,' after the god of the sun! . . . True, her father had forced her into this thing; but, God! had she no will of her own? She had seemed strangely complaisant!

"Lies, lies, lies! The sum of it was that she did not love him—never had loved him! Let him face the bare fact. Let him be brave. That was it. She did not love him. Lies, lies, lies! The perfidy of her—the hateful perfidy of all women—of this woman and all women! They were all alike!

"Thinking these and other terrible thoughts, the young man failed to notice that his horse, left to herself, had, on reaching the crossroads, turned north toward Aignan, instead of south toward Marciac. Nor did he come to himself until he found, to his great surprise, that he had passed the village to one side and was almost here, on the edge of the forest, looking down on the valley. The road on which we just came is a very old road; it was here then; it was first built by the

monks for hauling wood through this part of the forest. When he arrived at this Monk's Road, it was about the time of day it is now: the sun was setting, and if the young man had been in his right mind, he would have turned his horse back down the hill to the village, there to find shelter for the night. But, instead of that, he dismounted and sat down here among the gorse, and looked down on the little monastery, surmounted by its cross, and then, on, to the stout yellow walls of the village beneath, over which rose the roof of the castle in which he had first met the woman that was the subject of his wretched thoughts. Under that very roof, he, as a favorite of her father, had, at last, come to find her dearer to him than anything else on earth. Memories came; the sweetest memories he would ever know. He should have wept; but he did not weep.

"Again he chanced to look down on the monastery, which was just catching the last rays of the sun. From the unwalled fields about it—pitiful little fields—the monks were returning from their toil of the day, clad in their rough, black gowns, their garden tools in their hands, sickles stuck in their belts, worn there always as the symbol of their duty to cultivate the earth. How peaceful they looked! How far from the turmoil of the world in which he lived! For the moment a strange and soothing feeling came as he regarded these who had renounced forever the folly of this world to dedicate themselves to heaven. Then he gazed again at the roof of the castle.

"Meanwhile, as he sat here, twilight deepened into darkness and the stars came out. After awhile, faint lights twinkled through the trees from the windows of

the monastery. He recalled how his mother, noted for her works of piety, had once wanted to dedicate himself, her second son, to the monastic life, as sons of other noble families had been. But his father had been obstinate. It would have been better, he mused, if she had indeed given him to the good God before he had tasted so bitterly of the folly of this world—if she had placed him on the holy altar, his hand wrapped in its hangings, in the way St. Benoît had enjoined: *Si quas forte de nobilis offert filium suum Deo in monasterio si ipse puer minore aetate est, parentes ejus faciant petitionem et manum pueri involvant in pallu altaris, et sic eum offerunt.*

"The folly of this world! He got up impatiently and strode up and down the Monk's Road in the darkness, hardly knowing what he was doing. The folly of this world! Two things in it were worth while: love was one, and friendship was the other. A deceitful woman had robbed him of the first, and her father had betrayed the second. . . . The clouds obscured the stars. The rain began to fall. . . . The folly of this world! This thing had happened, and everybody was happy, all, save he. The Count of Armagnac was happy to-night—all the prisoners of war were to be freed because of this marriage, and peace would settle upon his domains; the detestable Count of Foix was happy—had he not a fat dowry, and the most beautiful maiden in Gascony as his bride? Beatrix was happy—*Dieu!* He suddenly arrested himself in his walk. He stood rigid in his tracks. His mind could not abide the thought that crashed into his consciousness: the marriage feast was over by now. The toasts had all been drunk. The company had arisen

from the tables. At this moment—at this very moment, she, Beatrix, was the wife of another, not merely in name, but in hideous fact! . . . A cloud burst and sent down sheets of rain; but he did not notice it. A frenzy seized him. His right hand fumbled clumsily for his short knife; he clutched it tightly. A flash of lightning revealed him there on the hillside, bareheaded, distraught, the veritable figure of a madman, when, all at once, with the veering of the storm, a sound came to him up the hillside—a sound so unwonted that he was startled into listening—a faint sound that grew on the wind—the sound of the voices of many men lustily singing through the night. It seemed to come from the wilderness of gorse close at hand—from the direction of the monastery lights just below. He hearkened. The stout choral of the monks, brave, as though aspiring toward the very gate of heaven, a stalwart message of harmony and peace across the discords of the storm, boldly entered the doors of his mind. He stood there listening. Swelling bravely on the wind, as if a multitude of voices were one voice, came the triumph of man's soul losing itself in the triumph of God:

"'*Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui sancto:—*
Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper . . .'

"Slowly, his hand replaced the knife. A few moments later, he found himself blundering against a tree; but he heeded it not; his feet were carrying him down the hillside towards those dim lights and that celestial music which called to him. Careless of the gorse and the briars that tore his clothes, he stumbled down and down, his faithful horse plunging after him.

"Now, as Henri, Baron of Marciac, was blindly finding his way down the hill, the monks were indeed singing the praise of God, as was their wont from near midnight until the break of day, with only short rests between. In the midst of their singing, there suddenly came a knock at the door. At first, no one minded it, thinking it to be the buffetings of the wind, or the patter of the rain (for which God be praised!), or the prowlings of some animal of the forest, or mere fancy. But at length the knocking became so loud and insistent that there was no longer any doubt that some one was outside demanding admittance, despite the lateness of the hour. Brother Andrew, one of the older monks, followed by Brother Thaddeus, took a lantern and went to the door, unbarred it, and looked out timidly into the darkness, holding his light aloft to see the better before him. For a moment he stood astounded, his mouth agape, and nearly dropping his lantern at the unaccustomed sight. For there, on the flagstones, was a young man, bareheaded, yet dressed in garments that well proclaimed his high degree, albeit they were torn and wet, humbly beseeching admittance. Brother Thaddeus excited, nonplused, speedily went for the Abbot. The heavy portal opened wider, the young man entered, stumbling over the threshold; and when the door of the monastery closed behind him, it closed to shut him from the world forever.

"Yes, to shut him from the world forever. For, renouncing without regret the pride of his rank and possessions, Henri, Baron of Marciac, favorite of the Count of Armagnac, after arranging his affairs, and serving his year's probation, at length took the blessed

vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity, donned the cassock of coarse white wool and the loose black gown and hood, and became known to God and his companions as Brother Matthieu. Not for one moment did he consider himself better than the rest of them because of his birth; for he confirmed in his own soul the Abbot's admonition: that the greater any one esteemed himself in the world, the more did he regard himself in this flock as less than the least. He kept his beard; but he let it grow longer, nor did he trim it in the fashion as before. He labored diligently with the rest, learning to use with skill and for God's glory the hoe in the garden, the scythe and rake in the fields, and the ax in the forest, accustoming himself at last to the meager one meal a day of legumes, bread and water. At night his voice was now added to the chorals of praise that rang out over the hillside and sometimes caused the wild animals in the forest to raise their heads and listen and furtively slink a little farther into its gloomy depths. Little by little, because he wrote a fair hand and was accomplished in matters of the mind, they set him to work at copying manuscripts in the scriptorium, and let him keep the *Catalogus Benefactorum,* which contained the names of those who presented gifts to the monastery and were to be remembered in its prayers. And in all this, though not until after a long time, Brother Matthieu found peace at last."

The Abbé ceased. Hippolyte waited; but as nothing more seemed to be forthcoming, he made bold to ask:

"And what became of Beatrix? Or doesn't the legend tell?"

"Several years after Brother Matthieu had taken his

full vows, the devil sought to tempt him. He had gone into the village with one of the older brothers on an errand for the monastery. As they went along what is now the Street of the Church, Brother Matthieu came full upon Beatrix, with her mother and a serving woman, emerging from the castle. He passed right on with his companion; but not until they had exchanged glances, in which there was more than recognition. He was not prepared to see her there—he was startled out of himself. She looked a shadow of her former self—pale and unhappy—and in that fleet glance he read in her eyes what was not good for him. That night he could not sleep. The next day, he went up with his ax into the forest and did not return. His companions could not remember when they had first missed him. The third night he wandered back in a dire condition and was found the next morning outside the door, unconscious. For three days he had eaten nothing. The thoughts which had entered his soul when he had seen Beatrix constituted a sin which convicted him in his own eyes of unworthiness of the companions of God. Far in the depths of the forest he had fasted and prayed for three days, exposed to rain and cold and wild beasts, lacerating his sinful body, just as St. Benoît once did among the thorns, until, at last, his soul was purged. For weeks he tossed on his cot with a fever. His ravings were pitiful to hear. The Abbot understood. He was filled with compassion. When Brother Matthieu was well enough, he confessed his sin with contrition, and the good God forgave him.

"Long, long afterwards, because of his holy life and signal ability in all that pertained to the glory of the

order, he, who had already become Prior, was elected by the monks as their Abbot. When other monasteries were becoming wealthy and ostentatious, and neglected their vows of labor, he resisted any such temptations to forget God. No, he insisted that their chasuble should be of common fustian, and their candlesticks of iron, and even their cross of wood—as was the cross of the Blessed Redeemer. Above all, he taught them how to sing better than they had ever sung before, so that they became famous for their psalmody; and it could be said of them what Guillaume of St. Thiery said of the followers of St. Benoît: 'When they openly praise God with psalmody, how pure and fervent are their minds is shown by their posture of body in holy fear and reverence; while, by their careful pronunciation and modulation of the psalms, is shown how sweet to their lips are the words of God—sweeter than honey to their mouths! As I watch them, they appear a little less than angels, but much more than men!' "

"So he forgot Beatrix at last!" murmured Hippolyte.

The Abbé's answer was cryptic: "He, too, learned to grasp the gorse without hurting his hand."

Soon they arose and made to go down the hill. Before doing so, they hesitated and looked back along the Monk's Road, sunken, scarred with deep ruts, and overgrown with weeds and grasses.

"The Monk's Road!" repeated the Abbé musingly. "When Brother Matthieu became Abbot, the monks would often see him walking up and down this road, his hands behind him, his head bowed, his lips moving as if in prayer. It was his favorite place for meditation. They never knew why."

They started down toward the village. After awhile:

"It is said," remarked the Abbé, "that the singing of the monks can still be heard on rare occasions. Sometimes you will see workmen pause in their piling of wood in the clearing, or a peasant will stop his oxen in the fields and stand, listening. . . . It is a lucky sign if one can hear it."

They came to the house where the monastery used to be. The Abbé went inside on his errand to the sick. Hippolyte's gaze was attracted by an ancient fragment of stone wall, different from the rest, at a corner of the kitchen.

"I wonder!" he said to himself.

When the Abbé came out at last, the twilight was deepening. They proceeded down the road, each wrapped in his own thoughts. When they reached the dark hollow, both of them stopped and looked at each other questioningly. For faint music seemed to come to their ears from the direction of nowhere in particular. Slowly they turned and looked up the hill toward the forest. The music ceased. They resumed their way, neither saying anything. As they neared the outskirts of the village, the breeze shifted and they heard the music again, this time more clearly. Hippolyte listened intently. Then he laughed.

"It is only our young postmaster, Dupuy, playing on his violin!"

When they came to the Back Street, the Abbé pointed down the Road of the Madonna and remarked:

"The statue of the Virgin yonder—I never thought of it before, but she looks directly out toward the monastery."

Hippolyte stopped short.

"H-m!" he replied, skeptically; "since she looks north, you could just as well say she looks directly toward Paris or London or anywhere else!"

"Yes," assented the Abbé, as they resumed their way, "she looks out on both the folly of man and the glory of God; and seeing both, the Queen of Angels is not perturbed; for, above the discords of the world's sins, she hears the songs of her saints!"

XI

THERE IS NOTHING LIKE A NEW BROOM

It was the middle of July, the height of summer in Gascony. The white roads, winding up the hills and dipping down into the little valleys, were grateful for their trees, which protected them from the sun. Peasants wore their sabots without any stockings. Old André, the road-mender, shaded himself as he worked with a large frame of poles covered with leafy branches, propped slantingly against the sky. Oxen plodded along with garlands of leaves around their necks to keep the flies off. The cicadas raised their monotonous crescendos from the dusty trees; it was as if through them the heat became audible.

This Saturday morning, the little doctor had gone fishing with Fitte, the notary, on the Arros river, near Izotges, where he had a patient. Children on the way to this, their last day of school, tarried to look for hazelnuts in the lanes, or foraged for blackberries along the hedges, cheating the birds. Some of them pointed to where the Pyrenees showed their sunny peaks far to the south, preternaturally clear.

"Oh, look!"

"Yes, it will rain, now!"

The sun, only half way up the sky, was still casting long shadows. It flung the shadow of the church over the edge of the cemetery; it threw the long shadow of

the crucified King of Glory over the graves, and the graceful shadows of the tall cypress trees over the wall into Abbé Pierre's garden, until, with no shadows at all, it shone full on the front of his garden house, over whose door the first grapes were ripening.

The door of the garden house was closed. The Abbé himself was near by in his vineyard, endeavoring to make a path through the center of it. He was working now with a shovel, now with a hoe, very deliberately; sometimes he would pause, his eyes gazing on space, as if following up some thought that had come to him. Just now, he was looking toward the square tower of the church at Sabazan, on its hill to the west. He was not in the least aware that he was looking at it; for he was thinking of something his old friend, Hippolyte, had said in criticism of that story of the Baron who became a monk. Hippolyte had complained that it was stuffed with alleged facts that could not be proved—that were not facts at all. Which, said Hippolyte, condemned the story from first to last.

"Hippolyte is too literal;" the Abbé was saying to himself. "Far too literal! I fear that too much archæology can spoil a man. After all, a story is a work of art. And what has art to do with mere facts? Assuredly, it must be founded on truth; but Truth ever aspires toward the beautiful and is never so stupid as to get in her own way!"

Having traveled this path of thought to its successful ending, and absent-mindedly merging its completion with the finishing of his task in the vineyard, the Abbé picked up his hoe and shovel and proceeded toward the garden house. On the way, it occurred to him to ex-

amine his fig tree—the one with the bench under it; so he laid down his tools and went over and looked up at the fruit now showing a tinge of purple under the July sun. He reached up and passed his slender fingers over one of them:

"They are small; but they are finer than the big ones—a better flavor, too."

He went on by the vegetable garden, from which, alas, thieves had stolen all his artichokes a little time before, just as they were ripe, and before he had had the chance to pick even one. He had been inconsolable about that—not for his own sake, but for the sake of Aunt Madeleine, who was very fond of them. . . . At the farther end of the potato patch was a tree in which could be seen the smooth, sleek skin of the nectarines, blushing a bright red through the leaves.

A little farther he stopped to regard his flower-plot. At this time of the summer, it was not much to look at: a rose bush in second bloom showed a few red blossoms; a few sweet peas, pink, lavender, and white, straggled up a framework of rough branches stuck in the ground. Over against the house, the dazzling sun kindled a border of nasturtiums into tawny flame.

The Abbé was just in the act of opening the doors of the garden house when he remembered that he had left his tools up beyond the fig tree. However, he decided not to go back now; he could get them later. He pulled one of the doors ajar and groped his way into the cool interior. At first, his eyes, blinded by the sun, could see little, there being no windows. His foot encountered a watering pot, which rolled to one side with a clatter; then he stepped upon something round, which

he guessed to be a potato. He went back and opened the doors quite wide and looked about. Indisputably, things had got into disorder here. Something would have to be done about it. His old father, who sometimes came to tinker at the workbench by the entrance, had left his tools helter-skelter, and had scattered shavings all over the dirt floor; a wheelbarrow lay on its side over against the rude table which he himself used when he came here to study and meditate; an old discarded harness had fallen from its nail and tangled itself up with a broken candelabra from the church; over some books on an upturned box, lay a bouquet of withered flowers; and all around the edges of the room small pieces of yellow clay had tumbled down from the rough walls.

The Abbé righted the wheelbarrow and trundled it outside. Then he looked about for the broom, and at last espied it under the workbench. He cautiously extricated it from its dusty place and started to sweep; but soon discovered that the broom was too dilapidated to accomplish much—in fact, the withes that bound the long stems of heather had loosened, and they were falling piecemeal, so that the broom left behind it far more débris than it swept up. The Abbé contemplated the broom speculatively, and shook his head. He tried to tighten the withes; but suddenly the last one of them snapped, and the whole broom fell apart, leaving in his grasp only the barren stick.

The Abbé regarded it helplessly.

"I don't know what use this is. A sorcerer might straddle it and ride through the air with it; but a priest . . ."

He set the broomstick upright in a corner.

"All things wear out. As it is with this broom, so with men, institutions, civilizations. Only the Church lasts—only the love of God can bind us together so that we perish not."

The Abbé had intended doing some writing this morning in the garden house—he had in mind a much-delayed letter to his old friend, the Abbé Rivoire—but the place was so uninviting that he presently locked the doors after him, and made his way up the road toward the village. He had to step aside for a *camion* to go by, loaded high with huge casks of wine. In front of the cemetery, he stopped to look through the rusty, iron gates at the sun-dappled graves among the trees; it looked so quiet and peaceful in there that his steps moved thither; but they were abruptly arrested by the sounds of hammering from the direction of the church. Was it possible? The carpenters and masons must have come at last to start the work of repairing the sacristy. It was incredible! He had been at them ever since he was made curé to get this done; and the Abbé Castex had been at them for a year before that—ever since the fire. No, it could not be! He hastened his steps, hardly daring to hope. Ah! There on the northeast side of the church, by the blackened wall, three men were busied, one sawing some new timbers that had been piled there since morning, and the others detaching some stones from the ruined wall, while old Courrou, the new bell-ringer, who had brought the keys, looked on, attempting to offer suggestions concerning a matter which a harness-maker could know little or nothing about.

The Abbé approached. They greeted him with respect and went on with their work, pausing often and consulting a vast deal on how to proceed, as if confronted with a problem that required great deliberation. The Abbé addressed one of the stone-masons:

"Be sure to put back the stones in the wall exactly where they were. You had better put numbers on them as you take them out."

"But see, Monsieur le Curé! We are piling them here to one side in the most perfect of order. There will be no mistake."

"Nevertheless, you had better number them for safety."

"But it is not at all necessary, Monsieur le Curé; besides, we have nothing to make the numbers with."

The Abbé thought a moment. Then, "Here are nails. Take one and scratch the numbers on the ends of the stones where they will be next to the mortar. . . . Each stone belongs where it was put so long ago, and nowhere else. And don't take out any more stones than is necessary."

"We shall be careful, Monsieur le Curé!"

The Abbé watched the work for at least half an hour and then passed on toward the Street of the Church, looking back from time to time. As he walked along, he said to himself:

"After all, something is being accomplished. During the nine months I have been curé, things have not exactly stood still. The statue of the Madonna has a new crown; the bell that was cracked is mended and is as good as new, thanks to poor Caubet; the space in front of the church has at last been cleared of grass and

weeds; the front door of the *presbytère* has been repainted; and now the sacristy! . . . Yes, things are progressing!"

A little beyond where the sabot-maker's sign—a huge wooden shoe—jutted out over the street, the Abbé paused before the largest store in the village. Set out on the narrow sidewalk was a spraying apparatus for vineyards, two tin-covered trunks, brightly varnished, some large wicker hampers, and a table piled with footwear—cloth shoes with cord soles and leather moccasins to be worn inside sabots. Hanging each side of the door were coils of rope, bellows, leather bottles, screens for the oxen, gayly embroidered in pink, and some lanterns.

"Bonjour, Monsieur le Curé!" sounded a pleasant voice, as a young woman appeared from the dim interior holding a baby in her arms.

"Bonjour, Jeanne!" The Abbé entered and looked about uncertainly. "The fact is, I need a new broom for my garden house. A good, stout broom."

"It is for the garden house? Monsieur le Curé doubtless desires a heather broom. I regret it very much, but I keep only the brooms of straw for the house. One gets the brooms of heather from the peasants on market day, or on Sunday, after mass."

"Of course. It is a long time since I bought a broom. But let me see the brooms you have. After all, perhaps a house broom would be better."

Jeanne first took the baby back into the living quarters and left it with her mother, and soon returned with a broom. The Abbé took it from her and examined it with care, especially noticing how the straws were

bound together and joined to the handle. He seemed much pleased.

"At any rate, this broom will not fall apart. It is not made like my old broom. It is not so roughly put together. It suits me exactly."

"But if it is for Monsieur le Curé's garden house, a heather broom would be better. This broom is too fine for a clay floor."

"Nevertheless, I shall try it. It is necessary that I have a good broom."

But when the Abbé learned the price of it, he hesitated. It was much more than a heather broom. It was an extravagance, this broom. Still, having set it aside and appraised it from a little distance, he took it up again and finally succumbed to temptation. He was thinking of his garden house and its study-table with the silver crucifix on it. Nothing was too good for this beloved retreat of his. He found himself saying:

"I will buy this broom."

After searching in the pocket of his cassock, he discovered enough money to pay for it and carried it to the front of the store where the light was better, turning it over this way and that and admiring it. He had a mind to take it straight back to his garden house and accomplish the needed sweeping; but he hardly liked to walk through the streets with a broom in his hand. He turned back to Jeanne:

"I'll send one of my choir boys after it. Tell him to take it to my garden house. It will be locked; but he can leave it by the door."

This momentous transaction having been concluded, the Abbé proceeded on his way around to the Back

Street. As he approached his house, he was just in time to see an ox-cart draw up to the front of it and stop. The old peasant who was driving it walked to the back of the cart and with great difficulty lifted upon his shoulders a large sack such as meal comes in—only, this sack could by no means contain meal now, for its contents bulged here and there most unevenly. The Abbé reached him just as he was laboriously mounting the steps to the door. The old man turned, and the Abbé at once recognized him as the country relative of his predecessor, the Abbé Castex, who had taken away his few belongings after his death. When the peasant saw the Abbé, he lowered his sack and laid it down on the top step. He smiled a toothless smile and hastily removed his *béret*.

"Ah, Jacques, you have a heavy load!"

"But yes, Monsieur le Curé, it is heavy enough. It has been difficult, but here they are at last. I have been intending to bring them for a long time. They are of no use to me. So, I said to myself, my cousin, who was a priest, owned them, and now they go again to a priest, where they belong."

"But, I do not understand, Jacques. What is this 'they' you talk about? You mystify me."

"Books, Monsieur le Curé! I took them away from this very house because they belonged to my cousin, who was the curé before you. The bed I could use, and the washstand I could use, and the two chairs especially, and also the table. But these books, no. I, who never learned to read, have no use for books. I put them in the corner of my kitchen. They were piled against the wall. Sometimes I looked at them. I often wondered

what was in them. But what is the sense of that? Then, one day I say to myself: My cousin, the curé, they were his; and what a curé has had, well, a curé may need. So here they are!" And the old man smiled again, more broadly than before, much pleased with himself.

The Abbé opened the door and helped him into the hall with the sack. It was not very securely tied, and just as they were lifting it over against the wall, the string broke and the sack tipped over, tumbling some of the books onto the floor. . . . The gift of the books had made the Abbé so happy that he invited the old man to come into the dining room and have a glass of wine. But he seemed embarrassed and confused, protesting that he had some errands in the village and must hurry along. The Abbé accompanied his guest out the door, thanking him in a way that made him feel that he had done an even better deed than he had thought. When Jacques had urged his oxen as far as the Road of the Madonna, he turned back, looked at the Abbé's house, and sighed:

"It is a great thing to give pleasure to any one like that!"

But if old Jacques had only known it, the pleasure of the Abbé was not to remain wholly unalloyed. For Aunt Madeleine made it plainly understood that she regarded the advent of more books into the house as an unmitigated nuisance. As the Abbé began carrying the volumes upstairs in armfuls, she spoke her mind without stint:

"You litter the house with books, and it is I who have to dust them and keep them off the floor! And where are you going to put this rubbish, I should like

to know? All your shelves are full as it is. Already you have had to put some of your encyclopedias in the dining room. If it keeps on, there will be no room to eat or sleep! A man never thinks of these things." But during this tirade, the Abbé, who well knew when to hold his peace, had already gotten the last of the books upstairs in his study and was fondling them one by one affectionately.

"My Aunt Madeleine may call them rubbish if she pleases. But these little volumes here, for instance, are far from rubbish: *Theologia Moralis Universa;* 'for the use of priests and confessors' it says. How old is it? Let me see: Ah! *Under the sign of the tree of Jesse; Paris, 1742.* And this dictionary of canonical law—five stout tomes! The binding must be mended; the leather is still good. But what is this between the leaves? Why, yes! It is actually the ordination certificate of the Abbé Castex! Over half a century ago! He was young, then. What hopes of life a man has! I have heard he was a powerful man in those days; but I did not know him then. . . . And here is something I have been wanting for a long time—these studies of Gascony, by Barrau-Dihigo. Hippolyte will want to see this—only, he has probably read it already. . . . Why, here's a book that looks almost new—a life of d'Artagnan, by Samaran. That puzzles me. Now, what could the Abbé Castex want with that? Ah, I see! It was a gift. The leaves are still uncut. Come to think of it, our famous d'Artagnan was born near here at Le Parré, where old Jacques Castex lives now! . . . This breviary—how worn it is! One detects the old curé's thumb marks here and there. I used to observe him from

the street pacing up and down in his front room yonder, with this same breviary in his hand, no doubt. . . . I wonder what use a priest could have for an agriculturist's dictionary—two volumes of it, too! 'All the information needed for managing country estates and for rendering rural life agreeable.' Well, in a diminished sense, one might call my garden and vineyard an estate, although I insist I need no dry-as-dust author to make it agreeable! Still . . ."

Thus the rest of the morning passed before the Abbé knew it, and he was startled by the shrill call of Aunt Madeleine up the stairs, *"A table!"* which made it imperative to lay aside his new treasures and to go down to dinner. He descended a little fearfully, expecting to hear still more of his Aunt's downright opinions about the additions to his library. But, instead, she greeted him with an agreeable smile and did not scold him about the books during the whole meal. Furthermore, he found on the table one of his favorite soups, with *fèves* in it. He made haste to compliment her upon it, at which she remarked:

"I have been thinking that you must take better care of yourself, Pierre. I am going to be more particular about your food. You do not eat enough. I keep forgetting that you are becoming old and need more attention than you get. I noticed it when you were carrying those books upstairs. They were too heavy for you. You ought to take a rest every day after dinner."

The Abbé looked at her soberly. "I deny that I am getting old. As for resting after dinner, I am planning to call on some sick people. . . . Anyway, I doubt that

one can keep from getting old merely by taking naps after dinner. Look at my father, here. . . ."

"It would be better," snapped Aunt Madeleine, "if he didn't gad about so much. But, at least, he eats!"

Here the Abbé's father looked up from his soup and remarked:

"I have often wondered why men lived longer before the Deluge than at the present time."

The Abbé arrested the progress of his spoon to his mouth and slowly laid it back on his plate:

"I lately read an author who claimed he had the answer to that. But I hesitate to mention it, since it might seem as though I were casting reflections upon my ancestry!" the Abbé looked fondly at the aged man across the table.

"Eat your soup, Pierre!" This from Aunt Madeleine.

"What was the answer?" demanded old Simon, as he reached for a second helping of soup.

"Well, this author thinks that the first men partook of the perfect temperament and constitution of Adam, who had inherited no bad habits from his ancestors, since he had none."

"There is more sense in that," remarked Aunt Madeleine, "than in many of the things I've heard you quote from books. . . . Pass up your plate."

"In a moment. . . . One writer says that life became shorter after the Deluge because of the infertility of the land, which was dried up by the salt of the sea, which, in turn, drove men to eat the flesh of animals. Add to this, an overindulgence in delicacies, which stifled man's natural heat, and you have the cause of many of the diseases that shorten our days. So it is

that one says, with good reason, 'The mouth kills more than the sword.'"

"You are not eating your soup."

"It is very good soup. I am eating it. To revert . . ."

"Your authors are silly, and leave out the most important thing. We have doctors to-day. Good doctors surely prolong our lives!"

There was playfulness in the Abbé's smile. "M-m! Yes. Perhaps. But some authorities claim that the ancients had a better knowledge of herbs than we, and that this knowledge is almost entirely lost. Besides, let me come to the point: it is quite conceivable that God diminishes our lives, so that, at the same time, our iniquities may be diminished."

At this point, the Abbé's father spoke up in a thin voice:

"In Egypt, there are more old men than anywhere else in the world. Women there bear two or three children at one time without any trouble, which is attributed to the water of the Nile."

Having delivered himself of this pronouncement, the old man reached for the bottle, poured some wine into his soup plate, and, after rinsing it about, raised the plate to his lips.

"Simon Clément!" cried Aunt Madeleine reprovingly. "When will you be through acting always like a peasant! You don't deserve to have a son who is a curé!"

"Pierre doesn't mind. Do you, Pierre?"

The Abbé was in a tight fix. But he got out of it as best he could:

"Aunt Madeleine is merely guarding you and me

against the time when we shall have visitors at table."

"Very well, very well," assented the old man, querlously. "There are no visitors to-day." And he again raised his plate to his mouth with trembling hands and drank off the contents, smacking his lips.

That evening, when the Abbé came home from the confessional—this being Saturday—he found his new broom standing in a corner of the hallway. Evidently, the choir boy had misunderstood his directions and had brought it here instead of to the garden-house.

"I might have expected as much. The boy is so full of the school entertainment to-morrow night that he is of no use whatever until it is over."

Just as the Abbé was about to take possession of the broom and carry it up to his library for safekeeping, Aunt Madeleine emerged from the salon where she had been putting back a lamp, and, to his great surprise, began to thank him profusely for having sent her this new broom at the nick of time when she needed one.

"The old broom is all worn out. I didn't think you ever noticed such things. Thank you very much, Pierre! It was thoughtful. I will pay you out of the house money. . . ."

The Abbé regarded his new broom regretfully. He hesitated:

"It is a gift," he replied, with a rare smile, as he slowly climbed the stairs.

Seated in an easy chair by the window and looking out at the afterglow that covered the sky beyond the roof of the ancient d'Armagnac house, he communed with himself thus:

"After all, it is a spiritual broom that I need most.

I go to the church to hear the confessions of the faithful, and who comes to the tribunal of penance? A few old women, the teachers at the school, and three little girls. No men. They come but once a year. . . . Yes, emphatically, it is a spiritual broom that I need. . . . It is said that the blessed St. François, when he went about preaching near Assise, carried a broom to sweep out unclean churches. . . . I had not thought of it before, but how well a broom fits the duties of a priest!"

XII

WHERE WOMEN ARE, THERE IS GOSSIP

In the Abbé's village, there are two schools: one sponsored by the State, and one sponsored by the Church. Conservative parents naturally choose the latter for their children. A few speak of the other school as "the school of the devil."

It is a fairly recent memory—that anxious time when the nuns were thrown out of the convent school and when the Church had to look about for another place to teach its children. But Madame Lacoste, pious and blessed with this world's goods, came to the rescue. Out on the road leading southward from the village, she owned a spacious house set in pleasant grounds. This she freely gave, that the Church might rear her little ones under her protecting wing. The Church had its boys' school, too—and to this the old Abbé Castex had given all the money he could save from his meager living.

The day after the episode of the broom, as twilight deepened, Abbé Pierre was leisurely walking out the road to the girls' school. Aunt Madeleine and old Simon, a little ahead of the Abbé, were discussing the last entertainment which the pupils gave as the fitting close of the school year. Old Simon was sure that the performances nowadays were not up to what they used to

be, and hoped to-night's would be better, although he took the privilege of doubting it.

"There will be several plays," remarked Aunt Madeleine. "You always like plays."

"When I was a boy, we knew how to do these things. Nowadays, children have no discipline. You can't make them do anything the way it ought to be done. It's getting worse and worse." Old Simon shook his head several times, gloomily.

When the three arrived at the school, they found themselves much too early—indeed, they were the first, except for some of the teachers, who were seeing to the final arrangement of the large classroom, which was to seat the people. Chairs, borrowed from the church, to supplement the benches, were already in order. An oil lamp, hanging above the center of the stage, had just been lighted; and now, in front, two lamps, serving as footlights, were being screened from the audience by red pieces of cloth. This done, the curtain, with a faded view of the village, was drawn across the stage, behind which the teachers disappeared to prepare the setting for "The Game of the Little One who would not Eat his Soup."

While waiting for the audience to collect, the Abbé strolled about the room, his hands behind his back, idly regarding the glass shelves along the walls, arranged as little altars to various saints. On each was a saint's statue, flanked with two candles and two vases. Each shelf was assigned to some pupil, who must keep it dusted, supplied with flowers in summer, and, during the month of the Holy Virgin, light the candles. The Abbé paused before the image of Ste. Germaine, she

with a shepherd's crook in her hand, and roses in her apron. Inevitably he thought of another Germaine—Germaine Sance, of this very village, she who married the American. How zealously, as a little girl, had she once cared for this peasant saint, keeping her vases filled even in winter with artificial flowers, so that the lowly shepherdess of Gascony might have the most beautiful shelf in the whole room!

The people began to arrive, the first being parents with children in the performance, from under whose outer garments peeped gay costumes. Then other pupils with their parents. The Abbé presently joined his household, which had taken a bench on the very front row. The seats were being rapidly filled now: here came the little doctor's wife and her mother, and Madame Lacoste, and the people from the Château du Blanin, and the new mistress of the Château de Lasalle—a plump woman with a face like a rosy apple, whose husband had made his money in Bordeaux; and here, at last, came Hippolyte, with his sister, looking about in vain for a front seat, and finally solving the problem by carrying two chairs far forward to a space by the wall, whence he smiled a greeting to the Abbé, who was immensely surprised to see him here.

From the time when the three loud raps on the floor signaled the rising of the curtain, to the end, when the piano pupils performed, the Abbé sat there in front, beaming upon his children and giving them encouragement. Even old Simon had to admit that the playlet by the boys, "The Little Sailors of Dunkerque," was well done, and that the girls never missed a single cue in their pretty *Comédie-Opérette*, which was so inter-

esting that he leaned forward over his cane, actually forgetting himself so much that he laughed out loud twice!

But to many people what was happening on the little stage was not nearly so interesting as what they saw on the second row of seats to the right. All eyes were upon two women—Suzanne Baquieu and her mother—as often as upon what the children were doing, and tongues wagged in restrained undertones:

"She married him for his title. . . . Well, she got fooled!"

"I thought she was poor; but look at her clothes!"

"If her song equaled her plumage! But . . ."

"She is prettier than ever."

"What a coiffure! We now know how they do it in Paris!"

"I remember when she was kitchen girl for Madame Capéran."

"Her precious husband has sense enough to stay in Paris. Why does she come here?"

"She is vain. She wants to show off. That's the reason."

"Her mother is the one that is ridiculous. Look at her earrings!"

"They'll always remain peasants. All their finery can't change those two!"

The low conversation back of her so annoyed Aunt Madeleine that she looked around several times and frowned disapprovingly—that is, until she herself espied the subjects of all this gossip. Then she turned to the Abbé and whispered:

"Suzanne Baquieu is here!"

But the Abbé was thoroughly absorbed in a playlet, "A Competition in Silence," by a group of the smallest girls. Aunt Madeleine repeated her message closer to the Abbé's ear, so that he had to attend.

"Who? . . . Ah, yes! You mean Madame de Bérac. Yes, yes!" And the Abbé fixed his eyes on the stage again.

After the performance was over, and while the audience was breaking up, the two women who had attracted so much comment moved here and there and spoke to a number of people, all of whom seemed to know them well. Some few avoided them; but many of those who had been the most biting in their remarks seemed willing and even anxious to greet them, making a mental inventory of what they wore and of every word they said, for future reference. The two even made a point of speaking to the Abbé—Aunt Madeleine had turned her back, and was talking with Madame Lacoste —who conversed with them pleasantly, as if he had known them long, and asked several questions about things in far-away Paris.

On the way home, Aunt Madeleine upbraided him for having been too cordial:

"Anybody can pull the wool over your eyes! They were just using you, Pierre. They wanted everybody to see they were talking to the Curé."

"If that were so," smiled the Abbé, "it would be a tribute to my office which I seldom receive."

"You forget that there are many in this parish who consider her questionable. Even a curé has to be careful!"

The Abbé was silent at this. Just as they entered the

Place and were passing under the acetylene light on the corner of the *mairie,* he remarked:

"I have known Suzanne ever since she was a baby. She was always a good girl."

"She was always a schemer. Pretty enough, yes! But she was as vain as they make them."

"Pride is a capital sin," mumbled old Simon.

"Yes," replied the Abbé, musingly; "and gossip injurious to one's neighbor, while not a mortal sin . . ."

"It is not just, Pierre, to speak of me that way!" interposed Aunt Madeleine indignantly.

The Abbé hastened to make amends. "I was not really speaking of you—not particularly. I do not believe you gossip. You only repeat the gossip to me, because you know I pay no attention to it."

By this time, they had arrived at the front of the house on the Back Street. Aunt Madeleine produced the key and opened the door. A little later, as she handed a lamp to the Abbé, which was to light him upstairs to his bedroom, she said, kindly—his father was out in the kitchen, pottering around:

"The trouble with you, Pierre, is that you judge everybody by yourself. The result is that you are blind to the badness in people."

The Abbé was on the point of an obvious retort. He thought better of it. He started up the stairs, merely saying, "Good night!"

"Good night, Pierre! Sleep well!"

Aunt Madeleine watched him fondly as he turned around the corner of the landing at the top, his light gradually receding, casting ever dimmer shadows, until his door closed gently behind him.

XIII

THE ABDICATION OF BARON DE BÉRAC

I

Ten years ago, the young Baron de Bérac lived in his château on the hill to the west of the village, and pretty Suzanne Baquieu lived on a hill across the village to the east. He was a noble and she was a peasant; but ten years have changed all that in a way to attest Béranger's saying, that the destinies, like the waves, are fickle.

At that time, Suzanne was kitchen girl for the Capérans, who lived at the corner of the Place toward the post-office. Those who saw her coming from the baker's with a big, round loaf of bread in her arm, or at the village pump, filling her jug, could not help noting her trim little figure, becomingly clad in a red dress, her dusky complexion with a faint flush to it like a ripening peach, her flashing black eyes, and her fine, jet-black hair, which, even in disarray—yes, especially in disarray—added to her youthful witchery.

Suzanne's parents were poor. They lived in a small, low-roofed house, dilapidated, covered with plaster weathered and cracked—the very house, with the one window in front, that is reached from the road of the Bethau by a steep flight of yellowed stone steps. For Suzanne, the only beautiful thing on the place was an old stump at a corner of the vegetable garden, over-

grown with a luxurious vine, whose leaves turned red in the autumn.

The parents were so poor that the children, as soon as they were old enough, were set to earning their own living. Suzanne's sister, more adventuresome than the rest, had gradually found her way as far north as Paris, where she became chambermaid in a hotel, and was now happily married to a chauffeur. Her brother was a blacksmith's assistant over in Plaisance. And now she herself was kitchen girl at the Capérans. She was more profitable there than in watching the turkeys or cattle.

Suzanne's mother, who was a fat woman with a lean tongue, let her husband know often enough that their poverty and his shiftlessness were synonymous. He listened with amiable patience—which aggravated her all the more.

"Don't stand there, grinning like an idiot! Oh, you have always such big ideas; but you do nothing!"

Yet, everybody liked this big, lazy fellow, a familiar figure at the café; with his broad brow, his distinguished nose, his strong, determined-looking chin, who deemed nothing worth while except the ambitious things he was destined not to do. So he talked about them. . . . There was hidden ability in the man somewhere; but it had never come to light. Suzanne placed him among the gods. And Suzanne was his one treasure. Her obvious partiality for him irritated her mother, who had pinched and saved to send her to the girls' school as long as she could. What had her big hulk of a father ever done for her?

The one refuge from the drab commonplace of a

life like Suzanne's is—romance. And Suzanne found her refuge there. She could read. She once discovered a yellow, paper-bound novel among some trash in the Capéran attic and devoured it in the kitchen during stolen half hours. It was a stirring tale of lords and ladies, with gallant loves and valorous deeds. It thrilled her. Here, in these pages, was revealed a glittering world that gave form to her most extravagant dreams. She read it all again, from cover to cover. It so happened that Madame Capéran had other paper-bound novels on a dusty shelf in her bedroom. Suzanne surreptitiously borrowed these treasures one by one. Henceforth, life lost its dreariness. The world became a glamorous place where bold eyes kindled with love and brave swords flashed lightnings. Imaginative as she was, Suzanne found no trouble at all in peopling the few châteaux near the village with the splendid men and women she read about.

One of these châteaux was the ancient Château de Bérac. It stood on a wooded rise, west of the village, with a long, winding drive leading up to it. From the road in front, one could glimpse through the trees a rectangular mass of rugged stone and sturdy square towers with narrow slits for windows. It was said that the walls were every bit of five feet thick! Suzanne had seen the young Baron's automobile once, sweeping through the village. On the door was a coat of arms in gold which glinted in the sun.

Of this irresponsible young noble, his roistering friends could well say that he was a jolly fellow, who by no means bred melancholy. Thoughtless, amiable, fond of the good things of life, Philippe de Bérac was

liked by the men of the sporting set he affected and coddled by a certain sort of women, who playfully called him, "Philippe le Bel," because of his homeliness. The fact is, he had come into the title too young and was too reckless by nature to be greatly impressed by the dignity of his ancient family. The result was that the people of the neighboring châteaux looked on him askance. He violated their aristocratic instincts by choosing his boon companions from men and women beneath his class, with whom, truth to tell, he was much more at ease than with his own kind. They openly sympathized with his younger brother, Auguste, who was in business in Toulouse—he of the receding chin and the exceedingly large nose, who took life as a solemn thing and was bitter because the title belonged to "a worthless *débauché*," who brought shame on the honored name of de Bérac.

"Our family has been noted for brave deeds," he would say. "We come of a proud race, respected and feared. You know our coat of arms—a spray of spiny gorse, gold on a silver shield, with the legend: 'He that touches me will be pricked!' A nice motto for a soft profligate like my brother!"

Perhaps the envious Auguste was right. Certainly, the "profligate" cared little for his Gascon domain. He neglected the vineyards, which were the chief source of revenue, allowed the château to fall into disrepair, while he spent most of his time in Paris, especially in the winter. In the summer, indeed, he sometimes brought a crowd of his friends—both men and women —down here for hilarious parties; then packed them back north, while he remained behind, pottering about

the estate, getting a few things done, and highly resolving to do better by his patrimony in the future—particularly, since he was getting into grievous debt.

It was during one of these brief sojourns at the château that he had his first glimpse of Suzanne Baquieu. His friends had all left a week before, and he was becoming bored. Sick to death of the dreary loneliness of the château, he drove over one evening to the annual performance at the girls' school, for want of anything better to do. In front of him and a little to one side, he saw the profile of a young woman, who sat with her mother. After a few looks, his ennui almost entirely disappeared. What eyes! What a complexion! Where were the rose-petals as soft as her cheeks! What a seductive curve to the full lips! What animation when she spoke to her mother, her tones not harsh, as in the usual Gascon speech! What hair!—its black, wavy filaments, unimaginably fine, falling with a caress over her temples and tiny ears! And what a throat! . . . True, her dress was very plain and was evidently homemade; but it became her wonderfully well. The women he knew would have been ruined with a dress like that. And when, at the end, she got up and moved out, what a neat little figure!

The next day was the fourteenth of July—Bastille Day. At night, there was music and dancing in the Place. The young Baron went. This little corner of Gascony had its attractions after all! He had inquired about the young girl, and discovered who she was. Suzanne Baquieu. Nothing but a peasant's daughter! . . . He was confident that she would be at the fête, dancing with the rest. He must see her again; perhaps his first

impressions were not to be trusted too much. . . . Bah! He, a baron, interested in a common peasant girl! How his friends would laugh if they knew it!

He came in his small car—a smart-looking roadster, with rakish lines, which he left near the post-office, then sauntered over to the brilliantly lighted Place, where crowds of people promenaded up and down, laughing, talking, listening to the music of the band, admiring the lanterns and gay flags strung along the front of the *mairie*. Over to one side, a group of chairs from the council-chamber had been set out by order of the mayor, for the use of some of the more favored families—the mayor's wife and her mother were on the front row. The Baron, a cigarette jauntily in his mouth, wandered about at the edge of the crowd, emphatically not of it, refusing a seat that was offered him, acknowledging, with what he considered becoming condescension, the greeting of the mayor and the few others who were bold enough to accost him, looking about him with one object in view.

At last, he saw her! After a lively quadrille, the band had started up the music for a polka. With her brother, who had come over from Plaissance, Suzanne Baquieu swung out into the cleared space with a score of young couples. He watched her, curiously at first, then with absorbed fascination. In his eyes a woman of the world would have read things that she might or might not have liked, depending upon her sort. So might a lion furtively watch a gazelle, come down to the stream to drink. No, he had not been mistaken. He believed himself a connoisseur; she even surpassed the expert opinion he had formed of her. He noted her little feet, clad in

low, cord-soled shoes that revealed her prettily-molded ankles; her exceedingly shapely limbs; the easy flections of her delicious body. . . . His cigarette went out. Yes, this little corner of Gascony had its merits! He promptly decided that there was nothing that called him back to Paris right away, at any rate.

There was an easy way to get in touch with her. Of course, he could not go to her; but she would come to him, and be flattered to do so. If he stayed at the château much longer, he would need more servants. This Baquieu girl—she was kitchen girl at the Capérans; her sort would jump at the chance of being a maid at the château.

It was all arranged through old Lizette, the wife of the aged caretaker. Three days later, she was installed as a housemaid at the Château de Bérac. Her wonder at her good fortune and her warrantable pride in her new position were exactly what he expected. The castle of her dreams had at last become real; she, Suzanne Baquieu, was actually living in a château! And, to her, the master of it was a chivalrous figure, as brave in her eyes, and every bit as dashing as any of the gallant lords of the romances she had read.

She had been given a room in the servants' quarters—a pretty room, a miracle of a room to her, who had known only that cramped and unlovely house at the top of the yellowed stone steps on the Bethau hill. Perhaps the room was a little better furnished than servants' rooms usually were, even at the Château de Bérac. Philippe had seen to that. When she was in it, she felt like singing.

Now, it is not to be supposed that Suzanne was as

innocent as a babe unborn; a young girl, even strictly brought up, has her unmanageable thoughts; but she was yet sinless, very religious, and she had ideals which were unutterably sacred to her. . . . The first time her master became a little familiar with her, she surmised that he must have heard some extraordinarily good news, and was simply expressing his good spirits. But the increased liberties of her young lord the very next day, when she was dusting in the salon, could not be accounted for in the same fashion. He playfully tried to put his arm about her. It was rather crudely done, and not at all in keeping with her ideas of chivalry. She forgot he was a baron, and, instead of being flattered, was frankly indignant; there was even a struggle; then, alone in her room, remembering his reputation for overindulgence in drink, she tried to feel pity for him. Surely, it would not occur again. He had simply forgotten himself. He was a gentleman. Later, when he realized his behavior, he would be sorry.

Two evenings later, she rushed up to her room, slammed the door and locked it, her cheeks scarlet, her whole body burning with shame. Presently, she was furiously making a little bundle of her possessions. As soon as it was dusk, she stole out through a back door and ran along the hedge down to the road. An hour later, she was back home. Her mother was as furious as Suzanne—and her fury was mingled with fear for the future.

The next day, the Baron did not see Suzanne about her accustomed duties. He understood quite well, he thought, and laughed to himself. The little witch! . . . She was avoiding him! Oh, well, women were that way,

it seemed . . . even a peasant girl . . . they were all alike, when it came to that. Some women were more coy than others, that was all. Women . . . they always required a certain amount of delicate strategy. Even a peasant girl had her outposts of defense which had to be taken first. It was all part of the game. He laughed again. *Sapristi!* She was well worth it! The little minx! How beautiful she had looked when she struggled in his arms and her little hands beat him from her! Surprisingly strong, too! The vixen! He smiled.

But when he did not see her for two days running, he interviewed old Lizette, first carelessly touching upon household matters generally, at last asking if the new maid was giving satisfaction.

"She is gone, Monsieur le Baron! Gone without saying a word to anybody. That is the way with the young ones—they are too flighty. You never can depend on them."

"Gone, you say?"

"But, yes, Monsieur le Baron, and good riddance, too, if you want my opinion. . . . Yesterday was market day. I saw her mother in the Place. I asked her about this Suzanne of hers. She was impudent. I could get nothing out of her. The Baquieus are a shiftless lot. . . . Nothing has been stolen. I looked carefully. Monsieur is lucky."

When the Baron was alone, he found himself growing very angry. It was hard to say whether he was more angry with Suzanne or with himself. He, who had boasted of his cleverness with women, to bungle things like a country boor! . . . Well, that was that! He had underestimated this clod of a girl, that was all. A plague

upon her and upon all womankind! . . . He tried to dismiss the whole matter, to snap his fingers at the episode. After all, what was this conceited little wench to him? He had been crazy. A passing fancy, that was all, which the sooner forgotten the better. . . . He summarily announced to Lizette and her husband that in three days he would return to Paris.

But he did not go. The image of the girl lingered with him, even as he was busily packing. When the caretaker and his wife were both out, he stole up to the servants' quarters and went to the room Suzanne had occupied during her brief stay. On the washstand by the window were some nasturtiums in a broken jug, some of them still fresh and gay. The blossoms were very much like her—something of the gladsomeness and innocence that was in her face. . . . He looked about the walls. There was a colored print, much faded, of the Virgin with her child. The room was very tidy. As he was about to leave, he noticed something on the floor under a chair in the corner. He went over and picked it up. It was a cheap, black ribbon. He shook it out and contemplated it, holding it at arm's length. He remembered. He had seen it in her hair. For some reason, which he could not have fathomed if he had tried, he folded it and put it in his pocket.

To Lizette's surprise, and, let it be said, annoyance, the Baron delayed his return to Paris from day to day. Finally, he had another interview with her about the missing housemaid.

"This Suzanne that left us so suddenly—has anything been heard of her? For instance, was there any accident? Is she ill? I suppose it is my business to know,

whenever a servant disappears, what becomes of her."

"One has only to listen to the gossip, Monsieur le Baron. It is singular. I was talking with young Renée Bruhac, the carpenter's daughter, who knows Suzanne very well. She says that her friend is not living at home. And this is the strange part: her mother will not tell any one where she is. Only, I found out from Antoinette—she is the cook at Madame Capérans—that she was seen one morning lately on the road to Fusterouau, on the *camion* of Monsieur Barousse. She sat on top of the casks, with a wicker hamper in her lap. But where she went, I do not know."

Fusterouau. That was the nearest railroad station. Suddenly, the Baron who, for all his waywardness, was a generous man, felt remorse. Was it possible that his foolery had frightened the little one away like that? That was bad enough. But besides—yes, it was clear—she must have told her parents. It was humiliating.

The next day, Philippe, the Baron de Bérac, returned to Paris.

II

During the months that followed, the young scion of the house of de Bérac frequented certain watering places in the north, as he usually did in the season, and was seen at the races, betting heavily and seldom winning. When autumn came, he plunged into the social gayety of the capital with the same avidity as ever; but still there was an indefinable difference in him. He had fits of abstraction, when he seemed to forget all about him. Imagine this Philippe le Bel with

fits of abstraction! A Gascon—a Gascon, mind you!—gazing into vacancy like a mooning poet! Decidedly, he was no more the jolly good fellow one had learned to like, and, incidentally, to borrow from. Finally, his closest friends gossiped together about it and thought they guessed the secret: their gay young comrade was in debt. Oh, well! . . . They shrugged their shoulders . . . he had had a good time while the money lasted, and so had they. . . . It was a pity! Still, let him not come to them for help. And, speaking of that, perhaps it would be just as well to let him go his own way in the future. It is better not to keep too close to a drowning man.

But, alas, what had happened to Philippe was nothing so sensible as worrying about his debts. Before now he had discovered the agreeable fact that he could take care of these by borrowing from his brother, Auguste, who had become disgustingly prosperous in that business of his in Toulouse. All he had to give in return was a little piece of paper with his name at the bottom. . . . No, what bothered his usually carefree mind was this incredible thing: a young Gascon girl—a common peasant girl, with a face as saucy and naïve as a nasturtium blossom, could not be put out of his thoughts. Unaccustomed to introspection, he nevertheless tried to analyze his own mind concerning her. Why, for instance, did her image keep intruding itself between him and the women he knew, who, in their way, were just as pretty as Suzanne, and were more of his own world? Perhaps it was this: his vanity had been hurt by her—yes, he had to confess that; but that was not enough. Her sudden running away from him—this

chit of a country girl, running away from *him!* . . . Well, what one cannot have, one wants all the more. Perhaps that was it. But the trouble was, that wasn't it, either. . . . Sometimes his conscience troubled him; he was still young enough for that; but, after all, who could say that he had meant any harm to her? He had been undignified and a little playful, and she had misunderstood him. . . . He began to persuade himself that if this Suzanne Baquieu had not been a mere peasant, he might have honestly fallen in love for the first time in his life! . . . His imagination dwelt on this more and more, in spite of him. Somehow, it was not so difficult for his fancy to lift her out of her world and make a lady of her. All she lacked was the fine clothes and manners; but what are clothes and manners? Some women who had them lacked everything else.

At last, one day, he fully awoke to the perverse and amazing fact which he should have realized long ere this: peasant or no peasant, she had a place in his heart from which no effort of his could drive her. Of course, he said to himself, it was not *la grande passion.* That would have been too utterly absurd. This much, however, he resolved: If he ever found her again, he would make it up to her—his frightening her away, and all that—he would do something for her—as if she were his sister.

The progress of these reflections—these silent events called thoughts, which work more revolutions than all your swords and cannons—occupied not a few hours or days, but weeks and months, until, at last, little Suzanne Baquieu stood out among his shattered ideals,

a peasant no longer, but the one real woman of his life. Of course this was the veriest nonsense; but love is beyond all reason, and its obscure roots strike deep into the foundations of the world, where barons and peasants are the same.

Philippe had one friend in Paris different from the rest—a shrewd fellow-Gascon from Mont-de-Marsan, who was in the automobile business and making money. For a short time they had been in school together. To him, at last, Philippe confided his state of mind, for he simply had to confide in somebody. The practical Charles at first made light of it; but when he saw his friend was in earnest, he was fully persuaded that he was making a great mistake.

"The trouble with you is," he said, "you have nothing to do. Your time hangs so heavily on your hands that you magnify a little affair like this until it is out of all proportion. You ought to be in business, like me. I have no time to fall in love. Which makes me think. Why not put some of your capital in my company? We are about to expand. It will do you good to have something to worry about besides women."

But when Philippe finally convinced his friend of how deeply his heart was involved, Charles spoke up in his direct way:

"Well, if it is as you say, why don't you marry her and be done with it? Mind, I don't advise it—she doesn't belong to your class—but you're beyond taking advice. It's been done before, though. There was a baron near Mont-de-Marsan who married his cook. It created a great scandal. . . . Don't go! . . . By the way, remember that last year our concern, even with

the little plant we have, paid dividends to the amount of . . ."

But Philippe had fled. Even his best friend could not understand him.

What irony! Here he was, in love with a woman of whose whereabouts he had not the least idea! And even if he could find her, she hated him—with abundant reason, she hated him, and would always hate him. Nasturtium blossoms? No! She was like the golden flowers of gorse of her native hills, with sharp thorns that pierced and hurt. Whimsically he remembered that device on his own coat of arms: *He who touches me will be pricked!*

And then one day, at noon, he suddenly came upon her—actually saw her, Suzanne Baquieu, in Paris—saw her in the flesh—in the most unexpected of places, a modest restaurant in the rue des Pyramides, noted for its reasonable prices—for, let it be admitted that the state of young Philippe's finances was, indeed, becoming worrisome. At first, she did not recognize him; nor did he even look at her, this trim little waitress, who had handed him the menu card and now stood at attention by the side of his chair.

It was only when he turned his head, so that she had a full view of his profile, and spoke in the voice she recognized only too well, that she knew who he was.

"Hors d'œuvre variés," he ordered, without looking up. "Afterwards . . . well, bring that first, and I will decide upon the rest later."

She hurried back to the kitchen. She was very pale. But her momentary fright gave way to indignation. So he had followed her here! For, she knew well enough

that his sort would not be likely to come to a place like this without some extraordinary motive. . . . She tried to devise some way of avoiding waiting upon him, but could think of none. She might ask one of the other girls to exchange tables with her; but they were all very busy, and besides, the rules were strict. For a brief moment, she thought of forsaking the place at once, even at the cost of losing her position. But even as she hesitated, his order on her tray, she heard the sharp tones of the manager admonishing her not to dawdle there in the way of everybody. Taking courage, she went forward and set the dishes in front of him, evading his eyes. . . . She need not have been so perturbed; he was very much absorbed in the melancholy reflection that he would be obliged to borrow again from his brother; and that already he had mortgaged his estates to an extent that was becoming alarming.

As she brought him his various courses, and he still paid no attention to her, she became less apprehensive. It was possible, after all, that he had not come here because of her. Perhaps he would not even notice her. Why should he notice a waitress? . . . How perverse is a young girl's heart! She began to feel a little piqued. . . . At last, when he was through and she handed him the yellow slip with the *addition*, he happened to raise his eyes. His shock of surprise was genuine.

"But, Mademoiselle!" he stammered, when he found words at all, "it cannot be! . . ."

"Monsieur is finished?" she demanded, with forced calm, pretending not to know him. It was futile. Boldly,

he kept looking at her in the face. In its confusion he was thinking it more beautiful than he had remembered it. She resented his inspection. Her eyes snapped. He saw that he must proceed warily.

"If you would but listen," he began, humbly, "there are matters I should like to discuss with you. . . ."

"There is not need, Monsieur. . . . Monsieur pays at the cashier's desk."

He perceived that she was about to leave him. . . . Was there no way . . .

"Suzanne!" The commanding tone of his voice arrested her. She turned in spite of herself.

"When one has done another a great wrong, surely one has the right to apologize."

He was very serious, this gay young noble. If he had smiled, perhaps she would not have lingered.

"We cannot talk here," he went on. "But, believe me, Suzanne, I must see you, if only for one little moment."

"Pardon me, Monsieur. I cannot. Besides, there is nothing you can say to me. . . ."

He was desperate. He thought quickly.

"Not even if it is important—such as news from home?"

A chance shot, entirely. He did not know it, but this was the one thing to make her hesitate. She had not heard from her mother lately; and in the last brief letter, her father had been ill. She was suddenly worried. Indeed, she looked so wretched and helpless as she stood there that he was immensely sorry.

"Is it my father?" she asked, bravely.

"Listen! When are you through with your work?

. . . I will meet you. . . . I tell you what I will do—I will meet you around the corner, by the statue of Jeanne d'Arc, well, any time you say."

"But, Monsieur—if it is about my father, and if you are not cruel, you will tell me here and now."

He had not the heart to keep her in suspense like that.

"As far as I know," he hastened to assure her, "your father is well—and your mother, too. But nevertheless, I must see you. . . . People are gazing at us. Quite likely, the manager will be displeased with you if I detain you longer. He is looking this way. By nine o'clock to-night, you will surely be through here. I will be at Jeanne d'Arc's statue."

"I will not be there, Monsieur," she replied firmly.

But he affected not to hear her. He rose from his seat and, reaching for his hat, passed out without another glance in her direction.

She cleared away the things. She dropped a plate and broke it. She spread a new *nappe*. Her mind was not on her work. The manager made her do it over again, because it was not straight.

As everybody knows, Frémiet's statue of the Maid of Orleans on horseback stands high on its pedestal in a small court, just off the busy rue de Rivoli. The armored maid, looking directly before her, holds aloft a banner in her right hand, her left reining in her rearing steed, which might otherwise charge straight through the traffic into the rue des Tuileries across the way. Of the hundreds of people who passed along the sidewalk that night, some few glanced up indifferently at the heroic virgin, whose gilded armor reflected

lights from the Hôtel Regina; but none of the scores of maidens that passed sought out the youth who stood there by the statue—a young man who eagerly looked toward the rue des Pyramides and scanned every face. He had already waited for a full half hour, and was about to give up, when, at last, she appeared. She was not alone. A woman a few years older than herself was with her. He had not counted upon that. He was disappointed. He wanted a chance to talk to her all by herself.

He advanced to meet them, raising his hat. The other woman smiled. So nice a gentleman, she was thinking; and so well dressed! Suzanne did not smile. She went straight to the point:

"The news you had to tell me, Monsieur?"

But he suddenly perceived a possible advantage in knowing this companion of hers, who was, quite likely, an intimate friend:

"Pardon me! You have not introduced me!"

Suzanne's friend did not wait. "I am Maria Villot. I am Suzanne's sister. She lives with me and my husband. I knew at once who you were. . . ." Of course, she had heard all about the episode at the château, not only from Suzanne, but from her mother, at the time she had packed Suzanne off to her. But Maria had always considered her sister a little foolish in the whole silly matter. And now the Baron's honest face and exceedingly courteous manner disarmed her completely. This man did not look like a woman-hunter. Besides . . . She went on talking, trying to make an impression. It is not every day that a chauffeur's wife can talk to a baron who smiles at one so pleasantly. But

Suzanne, impatient, interrupted her garrulous sister coldly:

"The news you had for me, Monsieur. I came for that. It is late. My sister and I must be getting home. We have only a moment."

He had never heard of this sister. Here was an unexpected complication. He saw that it was absolutely useless to try to say here the things he must say. He had feared it would be so, even without the unforeseen embarrassment of a sister's presence. He reached in the side pocket of his coat, pulled out a little package and handed it to her.

"This comes from Gascony, Mademoiselle. It is your own property, and so you need have no scruples in receiving it."

She reached out for it hesitatingly. To make up for her possible indiscretion in taking it, she bade him good evening and left him immediately. But she did not count on one thing: when she turned the corner, her sister was not with her. Indeed, Maria did not overtake her until she was passing along the dark side of the church of St. Roch. Maria had a great deal to say. What a genial gentleman he was, to be sure! Maria was quite enthusiastic. To be talked to by a real baron, like that!

As Philippe left the little Place de Rivoli to go to his hotel, he looked up in a friendly way at Jeanne d'Arc, seated erect on her gilded horse. He held in his hand a slip of paper with an address on it which Maria had given him.

When Suzanne got home and could get away from the prying eyes of her sister, which was exceedingly diffi-

cult, she opened her package. It contained a cheap, black ribbon, which she recognized at once, and a long letter in the Baron's bold handwriting. Her first impulse was to tear it into little bits, unread; but her curiosity got the better of her. She read it several times. It was a remarkable letter. The next day, when she could snatch a moment all by herself, she read it again, especially certain parts of it.

Now, when a man has carried your old hair ribbon around with him for months; and when he explains so plausibly that he is sorry for an offense which he freely admits is unforgivable, and yet asks forgiveness; and when he makes it very clear that, anyhow, he was utterly carried away at the time, and did not really know what he was doing; and when the man who writes all this tells you he has been in misery on your account because he truly cares for you—cares for you, indeed, as he has never cared for any other girl; and when he now asks nothing except to be pardoned, and that very humbly—well, what is one to do?

The trouble is that when that young man is a baron with a château, and you are nothing but a peasant girl, you simply cannot quite believe it, much as you would like to.

They did not meet at the statue of Jeanne d'Arc again; but, by the time spring came, they were taking walks together in the Tuileries gardens—and Maria was not with them, either. Always courteous, never presuming, almost convincing her at last that he genuinely cared for her, she felt more and more flattered, and was proud to be seen with him, fully persuaded that other women eyed her with envy. . . . The fact was,

that Philippe was head over heels in love with her. He had heard her brave story little by little. How her sister had first helped her to a position as chambermaid in a mean hotel on the rue Turbigo, where she herself was once employed. How, later, she had found more congenial work in the little restaurant in which he had found her, and where she still was, resolutely refusing his offer to find her a better place—to her sister's unfeigned exasperation.

"Take what you can get, you little fool!" she said one day. "But, no! When Fortune smiles on you, you make a face! . . . Now, if it was me . . ."

At first he had fully expected that Suzanne—a mere country girl—might seem to him crude in this cosmopolitan environment. He watched her for little gaucheries, which she never committed. True, she sometimes seemed out of place here; but it was only as something rare and precious is out of place amid common things. Perhaps he was blind. At any rate, as their acquaintance ripened, the distance between them grew less and less. After all, except for the accident of birth, this Gascon boy and girl were not so far from each other in nature and tastes. Any one, carelessly looking at them when she was at her best, might almost have taken her for the aristocrat, and him for the son of some middle-class shopman.

At last, one day, he made the decisive plunge. He asked her to marry him. She did not refuse; but she referred him to her parents. She was strangely tenacious of the conventions; and, besides, she was still suspicious of him. It couldn't be. He was playing with her. If he were a young man of her own station, and if she were

thoroughly in love with him, it would have been different. Being a true daughter of Gascony, she had a lot of practical sense. She made him feel more and more that it was his rank that stood between them. Who was she, to be mistress of a château? She referred to such things more than once. And yet, let the perverse truth be said: if it had not been for this very romance of his rank, it is doubtful if she would have let the affair go as far as it had.

A frantic letter from her mother confirmed her belief that he could not be serious. She had had experience, too, with all sorts of men in the little restaurant. These men! . . . The more plausible they seemed, the more one had to look out for them. Paris was full of his kind. . . . The letter Philippe received from Madame Baquieu was exceedingly curt and definite.

Now, since Suzanne was still under legal age, this apparently settled it. In his despair, Philippe went to her sister, Maria. Three days later, papa and mama Baquieu received a remarkable composition written on paper purloined from the hotel on the rue Turbigo. They trusted Maria. According to her, great things were about to happen to the house of Baquieu. It was a miracle of a chance to better their fortunes. The sooner, the better, before this young fool of a baron changed his mind. Think of it! A Baquieu would be mistress of the Château de Bérac! People would see! What a triumph! Mama Baquieu was completely won over. Papa Baquieu had to agree, as usual.

"You will live in the château," repeated her sister to Suzanne over and over again. She drew glowing pictures of what their new life would be like. Not only

Suzanne, but all of them, would live at the château. How envious everybody in the commune would be! They, the Baquieus, would be somebody at last! They would roll around in an automobile with a coat of arms on the door, and bow distantly to their old friends. After awhile, they would ignore them completely; but for a little time they would bow to them, which would be a great concession, for which they would be grateful. . . . Under the tutelage of her sister, a future opened up before Suzanne as wildly extravagant as any romance she had ever read at Madame Capéran's. She even persuaded herself that she really cared for Philippe—in a way. How she hated this Paris, and how she longed for Gascony! She woke up in the night and lay for hours thinking of the dear, familiar scenes. And now the chance was given her to go back! Not to live, either, in the wretched house on the Bethau hill, but in a real castle! . . . Yes, it became easier and easier to persuade herself that what she felt for Philippe was what people called love.

She was a little puzzled, though, that when she talked to Philippe of their future life at the château, he was strangely silent. He had a surprise for her, he said. He would not tell her what the surprise was. He seemed to be very busy much of the time, these days. Once, his brother came to Paris to see him. She thought she guessed it: he was having the château repaired, and perhaps refurnished. She had seen enough of it in her brief stay there to know it needed it. The neglected gardens, too; no doubt he was getting everything in readiness.

She could hardly wait for the day of the wedding.

That her parents could not come did not bother her. She would see them soon enough—she, the Baronne de Bérac! Come to think of it, she must see that they were dressed properly after this. Her father must no longer spend his time at the café in the village, associating with everybody, as was his custom. They were no longer peasants. The people of the other châteaux would call on them, sweeping up the winding driveway with their fine cars. . . .

III

The brides of this world have met with all sorts of surprises, some good, some bad, some merely amazing. But the surprise that awaited little Suzanne Baquieu, now the Baronne de Bérac, just one hour after her wedding was out of all proportion with what her husband had hoped, much as he had sacrificed to make it possible. Impatient, bursting with the secret he was to divulge to her, he at last was alone with her in a taxi honking its way from the church eastward along the rue de Rivoli. He was very happy, and could not refrain from putting his arm about her and kissing her and saying things she was very glad to hear. When they had nearly reached the Place de la Bastille, they turned into a side street, and he tenderly helped her to alight. He led her upstairs to the third floor of a modest structure and proudly took from his pocket a key and opened a door. When they were inside and the door securely locked behind them, she found herself in the midst of a three room apartment with the cutest of little kitchens—and behold! There on a table by the

window was a cracked jug, the very one she had had in the servant's room in the château, filled with the most wonderful of red roses! Other little possessions of her own from home were there; and in the bedroom, was hung a fine photograph of himself in a large gilt frame!

Her naïve delight in it all was thrilling to see, as she ran from one little room to another. She tried the chairs. Upon opening the wardrobe in the hall, and finding therein the old red dress that she had worn while kitchen girl at the Capérans, she laughed delightedly at his whimsical thoughtfulness. If she ever loved him, it was at this moment.

"It's wonderful!" she cried, rushing to him and allowing him to hold her very tight in his arms. "When we come to Paris, to have a little nest like this! I had dreamed only of the château! But you give me everything!"

She began removing her hat. She threw him a radiant smile:

"Of course, we shan't be here much, so it's plenty large enough!"

She laid aside her hat—it, too, was a gift from him—ran to the window and parted the curtains. The outlook was not particularly entrancing. The street was very narrow. A feeble shaft of sunlight just managed to struggle through to the sign of a furniture repairer just across the way. A street vender was raucously crying his wares. She wondered just why he had chosen this particular part of Paris. And then she understood: it was because it was near her sister's. How thoughtful he was in everything! She turned and faced him, the

most ravishing bride in the world. At last! Now was the time when he could tell her of the happy surprise he had hinted and which he had saved until this moment.

"It is heaven to hear you say you like it!" He sat down and pulled her gently onto his lap—what a light little wisp of a thing she was! "I am going to tell you something that will make you even more happy," he went on, when it was possible to proceed. "There is no baron any more, and there is no château, so nothing now stands between us, and this is to be our home together—right here, *mon petit bijou*—and we are going to be the happiest lovers in all the world!"

She listened to the passion in his voice, rather than to his words, not comprehending at all what he was saying. But he seemed to be expecting some word from her, for he had paused.

"What is it you say, my Philippe? I am so happy, Darling! You'll have to repeat it all over again. . . ."

He did repeat it all over again. She listened in a dazed way. He was saying strange things—incredible things. She disentangled herself from him and stood up. She had nothing to say. Even yet she did not understand.

He laughed contentedly. "The old château is gone. . . . It costs a great deal to die in Paris, so they say; but it has cost a heap more to live in Paris, as I have been doing. Yes, we are rid of the old barn of a château. My brother has it. I am glad to be rid of it. True, I couldn't get rid of the title; but I did the best I could. What is a baron, after all, without a château? Oh, my fox of a brother can have it! He schemed for

it slyly enough, loaning me money, until, at last, there was nothing for him to do but to foreclose on the old thing. Much good may it do him! . . ."

She stood there, gaping, thunderstruck.

"You—have—sold—the—château?"

"But, yes, *ma petite perle,* I have sold it. You are surprised, are you not? Now! We can begin life together! Isn't that fine?"

"You . . . you lie!" She was very white. Then she saw that he was smiling up at her confidently. He was so sure he had done the right thing, the fool! She broke into a laugh. The thing was so absurd.

"Forgive me, Philippe! I should have seen at once that you were jesting. If it were true . . ."

He did not like the look in her eyes. For the first time, he began to sense that something was wrong. He was puzzled. He arose and went over and kissed her. Then:

"It is true. . . . Why, you don't mind, do you? . . . Why, I thought . . . I thought you would be glad!"

She had jerked away from him angrily. At last, it had dawned on her that he was telling her the literal truth. She tried to control herself. She stood there, trembling. A slow fury was gathering in her face. At last, she found words:

"You have deceived me! You should have told me! I never would have married you, and you know it! . . . No, and no, and no! . . . Do you want the truth? I have never loved you!—I shall never love you! . . . Oh, I should have known that it was nothing but lies, lies, lies! Just as it was from the beginning!"

She rushed to the bedroom, stumbling over the threshold. She blindly reached for her hat, which she had thrown on the bed. Instead, she sank down by the bed in a torrent of weeping.

He was astounded. He tried to comfort her. He assured her that it was not so bad as she thought. He had saved some money out of the wreck. Why, he was in business already—in the automobile business, right here in Paris, with a friend. He was working hard. He would make good. It was all for her. Listen! They might easily be rich some day! They would have an even better apartment soon. Afterward, a house of their own, if she wished it—perhaps a little villa near Paris, with a garden. If she regretted the title—well, he still had the title. Perhaps, some day, he could buy back the château, if she cared for it so much. If he had only known! He loved her—loved her with his whole life and soul—was that not enough? . . .

But, alas, it was not enough. . . . As the days went by, she could not succeed in rising above her bitter disappointment. She blamed him, she blamed her sister, she blamed everybody. . . . Furthermore, although she did not love him, she was jealous of him. She could not forget his reputation with women, and his first designs upon her. They were wretchedly unhappy: he, because she was; she, because all her dreams had ended in absolutely nothing. Perhaps she was angriest of all with her sister. She would have nothing to do with her any more.

The time came when the business prospered. Philippe was fundamentally no fool. He was doing very well. They even moved to a larger apartment in a much more

attractive quarter of Paris. It was then that Suzanne insisted upon having her mother with her. "What a woman wills, God wills." She kept at him until she had her way. Madame Baquieu came all the way up from Gascony at last, bag and baggage—which did not help matters in the least. It was two to one, now. Philippe learned new and cruel variations of the truth that a woman can be a very perfect devil. Madame Baquieu took her daughter's side in everything. There was apparently only one thing that united the sorry couple: they both were heartily ashamed of this crude peasant-woman before their friends. But Madame Baquieu was blissfully ignorant of this. What glory was hers when she ran down with Suzanne to her native village to show off her fine clothes and to tell everybody how rich her daughter, the Baronne, was becoming! She was supercilious with her old acquaintances, as if she were saying to them: "Is it possible that there are people who can exist and not live in Paris?"

IV

Now, the next day after the Baronne de Bérac and her mother, on a visit to their native village, attended the performance at the Girls' School, Aunt Madeleine referred to them again, in spite of the Abbé's rebuke of the night before. They were at dinner.

"I cannot help what you say, Pierre; but that woman is very much to blame. She ought to have known better in the first place. A peasant, no matter if she has the chance, shouldn't marry above her station like that! No good can come of it. H-m! She knows by this time what

that gorse on his coat-of-arms means: 'He who touches me will be pricked!' Well, she's pricked, all right enough! . . . Have some more of the goose, Pierre."

"And yet," blandly retorted the Abbé, helping himself sparingly, "and yet, the prick of the gorse is never fatal."

Truth to tell, there are reasons for thinking that the good Abbé is right. In the last few years, the wily Auguste's business in Toulouse has taken a slump and lately he has been borrowing heavily from Philippe and signing sundry pieces of paper. Indeed, it looks as though Suzanne's longings for her native village and the château of her dreams might yet be realized. It would be fortunate in more ways than one, for everybody is aware that an apartment in Paris is not the best place to bring up a lusty Gascon baby—and Suzanne told her husband a piece of news the other day.

Who knows?

XIV

THE GARDEN OF WIDOW MARCOTTE

I

On a late afternoon in September, Abbé Pierre, alone in his cart, was jogging homeward along the winding road from Lupiac. At length he reached the high road from which he could look down upon the wide expanse of his native valley, now softened by the light of the setting sun. Yonder, the huddled roofs of the village were already in shadow; only the church tower caught the shaft of golden light that sent its level rays from over the tips of the hills to the west.

This last climb had been a hard one for Poule, his mare. The Abbé relaxed the reins:

"You needn't hurry now, Poule. We are nearly there. You have done very well. Only . . . Behave yourself! Why is it that you always think the grass by the road is so much better than anything you get at home! . . . Ho-o-o!"

The Abbé suddenly pulled up in front of a peasant's house close by the road. A dog rushed out from the yard, barking furiously. A young man, attracted by the noise, came from the door, bareheaded. Seeing the Abbé, he called to the dog; then stepped through the rickety gate to the side of the cart, accosting him pleasantly.

"Well, Félix! I did not expect to find you up here. . . ."

"I dropped by to see my mother, Monsieur le Curé. That is one advantage of being a postman. The last part of my route brings me this way, and I often have time to stop in before going on home. You see, Monsieur le Curé, I have a bicycle, now." Félix pointed proudly to where it stood conspicuously by the door. "I get through in half the time."

The Abbé reached under the seat of his cart and was pulling out a basket, when his mare suddenly started, so that the basket tumbled to the road.

"Ho! Poule! Easy there! . . . Thank you, Félix. Nothing that will break. Even the lid didn't come unhooked. . . . You might ask your mother if she has any eggs to spare. By the way, your mother is well, I hope?"

"Quite well, Monsieur le Curé. It is true that yesterday she had one of her dizzy spells. But that is nothing. . . ."

Even as Félix spoke, the Widow Marcotte came into view from around the corner of the house, where she had been so busy with her pigs that she had not heard the Abbé's approach. Looking up, she caught sight of him, and stood stock still for a moment, nervously smoothing her voluminous skirts and tucking her hair back under her close-fitting black coif. Then she came quickly to greet him, her wooden shoes clacking on the hard clay. The Widow Marcotte was better looking than the average peasant woman—not so wide across the hips, nor so stolid in expression. In spite of the fact that she was in the late forties, when Gascon peasants are

already old, her angular face still retained some of its youthful attractiveness, due partly to the animation of a pair of very good eyes. Her smile would have made one forget her age, if it were not that some of her teeth were missing.

"*Bonjour,* Thérèse! It is this way: My Aunt Madeleine told me to stop here for the eggs. I was just about to pass by, when it came to me."

"How many, Monsieur le Curé? It happens I have plenty. The hens have never done so well for this time of year."

The Abbé considered. He shook his head in a melancholy way. He sighed:

"Now, strange to say, I have utterly forgotten that part of it. Well, you had better give me a dozen. Yes, I am almost sure, now, that it was a dozen."

The Widow Marcotte disappeared into the house and duly returned with the eggs in her ample apron. When the basket was carefully stowed away under the seat once more, the Abbé lingered to chat.

"Your vineyard looks prosperous," he remarked, casting his eye up the steep slope back of the house. Orderly rows of sturdy vines climbed to the top of the hill, where they were touched by the last shafts of sunlight. "And your garden across the road . . . I noticed your dahlias when I passed this afternoon. They are better than ever, is it not so?"

The widow sighed. "They have never been so good as when my husband was alive. I have not much time for flowers, now. But I do my best, which is not much, what with all the trouble we have had lately with the neighbors."

"You have had trouble with Cocharaux? I have heard complaints of him before. . . ."

"It is not Cocharaux," put in her son. "It is the Dastes. They are very quarrelsome. They say part of the garden encroaches on their land. They are talking about it all the time. They hound my mother to death. It is getting worse and worse!"

The Abbé reflected a moment. He knew these Dastes well enough. They were a malicious lot.

"It is a pity!" he finally said. "But you are sure you are in the right?"

The Widow Marcotte's eyes flashed. "It was all settled long ago, Monsieur le Curé, when my husband bought the land from them. Oh, they were glad enough to get rid of it, then! He paid a good price, and they needed the money. When he was alive, they did not dare say anything. But now I am alone, they think they can do anything they please. She has the tongue of a viper. They lie about me all over the village. Why, she says her husband is going to sue me!"

"It is as bad as that! Well, well, well! . . . Still, there is this to say: if you are in the right, don't fear. Let it come before the Justice and all will be well. No, I shouldn't worry! . . . But I must be on my way! I will be late for dinner if I do not take care. . . . Steady, Poule! Ha! There, there!" And the Abbé's cart rattled down toward the village, disappearing behind the high hedge at the turn of the road.

II

For the last three years, fortune had indeed been unkind to the Widow Marcotte. In spite of her pluckiness,

there were times when, all alone by herself, the tears came. First, there was that terrible year when the blight seized the vineyards. People said that Henri Marcotte had enough laid by in his woolen stocking to weather the storm; but, alas, how little they knew! When he died, his widow discovered that under the stone by the fireplace, where she had expected to find a great deal, there was barely enough to pay for the funeral. There was only the land, in which he had put all his savings, as is the way with the peasant, ever ambitious to rise to the envied dignity of a *propriétaire;* and she was compelled to sell most of that to pay debts of which she had known nothing. She hid her poverty from her son, who was married and with troubles of his own. She pretended to him that she was well provided for. When he upbraided her for selling everything except the vineyard back of the house, and the garden across the road, she made the excuse that there was too much for her to take care of. With great thrift, she managed. Her vineyard brought her something. On market days, she sold vegetables and chickens and eggs with the other women in the Place. Her vegetables brought higher prices than any except old Marinette's. Her tomato plants were easily the best to be procured anywhere, because her garden was so well exposed to the south. She could not do the heavy work of the vineyard; but her neighbor, Cocharaux, whose place was a little down the road, had a pair of oxen, and she hired him to do all the plowing and spraying. Ordinarily a hard man, and not too honest, he was very kind to her. Her son chided her for working so hard; but she smiled and said that it occupied her time and kept her from

being lonely. He was much worried, though, over her occasional spells of dizziness. They came soon after her husband's death. But she made light of them. Peasants have no time to think of their ailments. There is always the work to be done. They keep on until they drop in their tracks.

So here, in her small, rectangular house, the Widow Marcotte lived alone by the side of the road. From her door, she could look straight southward across the fields to the long white road climbing the hill to Castelnavet, amid its cluster of trees. To the right, she could see little Fromentas, like a toy village, with its church tower and a few red roofs; farther away, Lartigue, with its stubby spire; then on, across the hills and valleys, her eye could travel to the giant Pyrenees, dim in the distance. Her son came by every day. That was a great consolation. But most of the time she had no one to converse with; so she got into the habit of talking aloud with the chickens, and geese, and pigs, and the dog. She was very religious. Often she made her way down to the church—to mass, to vespers, always to confession once a week. She had even made the pilgrimage to Lourdes. She had never forgotten the time when the Archbishop, on a visit to Aignan, passed by her house in his carriage and gave her his blessing as she stood by her gate. . . . After mass on Sundays, she would sometimes go to the cemetery, where there was a grave overgrown with roses.

Now, if the Widow Marcotte had one passion, it was her garden across the road. And what a little paradise of a garden it was! It was very happily set in a fold of the hills, where the sun could get at it all day long, ex-

cept early in the morning and at evening. People going along the road sometimes paused to look at it. They always spoke of it as "Widow Marcotte's garden," as if it had grown to the dignity of an institution. For instance, after supper the little doctor's wife was likely to say to her sister, Angèle, who was visiting her, "Suppose we take a walk as far as Widow Marcotte's garden."

And yet, the garden was a very informal affair. Perhaps that was its charm. You entered it by a rustic gate that opened on a path running straight through the middle of it; a path bordered with beds of dahlias, and asters, and chrysanthemums, and lavender, and old-fashioned pinks, and anemones, let alone flaming red geraniums planted in three large grease-pots, a soup-pot, and a pail. The plots were not enclosed by straight lines; the whole thing made a pattern so crazy that it was quite delightful. To the left, beyond these beds of flowers, were the peach trees bordering the vegetable garden; and to the right was a pond. Every garden in Gascony had a pond; but Widow Marcotte had reason to be especially proud of hers, for it was fed by a spring and did not have to depend upon the rains, and it was clear as crystal at one end, where, under the willow tree, you saw the board she used for rinsing her clothes. From the road, people could hear her slapping her linen on it, or, more often still, the sound of her hoe in the potato patch; and she, in turn, could hear the voices above her as they passed, or the clatter of wooden shoes, or the rattle of the carts. Certain it is that, looking at this pretty garden, you would never think of conflict and strife; you would only think of peace. Yet,

it was over this very garden that the most bitter of quarrels had occurred between the Widow Marcotte and her neighbors, the Dastes, who used to own it, and who lived just beyond the pond to the west.

From the moment the Dastes had sold this sunny patch of ground to Henri Marcotte, they had regretted it. Their anger at their own folly turned to unreasoning resentment against the man who had bought it. Had they not been in sorry financial straits at the time, it would never have happened. It was the best part of their land, and, above all, the only pond they had was on it. They had dug a new pond, but the clay did not hold the water well from rain to rain, and it was dry half the time, especially in summer. So, the first time they had had a good year, and had scraped together a little money, they tried to buy the land back. But Henri Marcotte refused outright. When he died, his widow was just as unmanageable. Why, she would almost as soon have thought of selling her house!

When neighbors once begin to quarrel, there is no knowing where it will end. Scores of things happened to increase the widow's unhappiness and the Dastes' hatred. For instance, one evening, when Leo Daste was bringing home a new pair of oxen from the ox-market —the first he had had for four years—they became unmanageable on the road in front of Widow Marcotte's, broke through the gate, knocked off a huge piece of plaster from the wall of the house, catapulted against the door, smashing it off its hinges and splintering it into a hopeless ruin. She tried to get him to pay for the damage; but he laughed in her face, alleging that it was her dog that had frightened his oxen in the first

place, and that if anybody should pay damages, it was she. With much trouble, Cocharaux made a new door, stouter than the old one, out of some old lumber; but she could not afford to paint it; so there it stood, in all its barren ugliness, a constant reminder of her neighbors' injustice. She grew to live in constant fear of what might happen next.

What actually did happen next was far worse than she could have dreamed. The Dastes put forward the claim that part of her pond was on their land—the part where the spring was. It was true that the boundary line was exceedingly irregular, and the Dastes knew well enough that they had nothing to go on. The stone at the corner, which marked the two properties, had always been there. But they hoped to harass the poor woman into selling. When they failed in this, they deliberately roiled the pond, throwing sticks and refuse into it, so that the Widow Marcotte could no longer do her rinsing there. They got bolder. They even tried to divert the spring. But they had reckoned without Cocharaux, who caught them at it and gave them such a sample of his ox-driver's tongue that henceforth they hated Cocharaux as much as the widow, whose cause he championed. Finally while Leo Daste was plowing with his oxen one morning, he turned up the boundary stone, as if by accident, and stealthily put it back in another place. It was only three quarters of a meter from its former position; but it made all the difference in the world. The widow did not notice it until a few days later. She could not believe her eyes. She looked at the stone a long time, trying to remember. Then she examined the ground. Hastily, she went for Cocharaux,

who was spraying in his vineyard. He came. It was too clear. With the stone where it now was, a fifth of the pond was on the Dastes' land. Cocharaux shook his fist menacingly at the Daste house. Leo Daste was just coming out. Cocharaux hurled an unprintable epithet at him, then hastened down to the *gendarmerie* and lodged a complaint that got Leo Daste into grievous trouble.

That week it was that Leo Daste went all over the village accusing the Widow Marcotte of disreputable things which nobody quite believed. But they were said. The next time the Daste woman passed the widow in the road, she would not speak to her, except to call her a fearful name under her breath. The widow heard it. That night, she had one of her dizzy spells.

III

The following Sunday—three days after Abbé Pierre stopped for the eggs—the Widow Marcotte dressed in her finest clothes and went down to the village to mass as usual. She wore a new hat which her son had bought her at the *Bon Marché*—a hat she was very proud of; but even this did not serve to console her. She felt friendless and alone. The average peasant woman has not many friends. She has her neighbors, with whom she gossips; but even they, because of their hard lives, are likely to be selfish, harsh, and cynical. It is a grim existence, with little that is sweet. But the Widow Marcotte had one friend in whom she had infinite confidence: old Marinette, whose tiny house was on the Road of the Madonna opposite the statue of the Virgin, at the edge of the village. Despite the discrepancy in

their ages—Marinette was at least eighty, although she was still robust and hearty—they had many things in common. On market days, they displayed their vegetables side by side by the curb in front of the *mairie*. They often talked over their lore on the care of their live-stock, and the right time for planting things in the garden. They shared the same superstitions concerning these matters. For instance, neither would think of killing a goose or a pig on "worm-day"—the day in every week corresponding to Assumption Day for that year—knowing full well that worms would get into the pickled meat. Precisely what the Assumption of the Virgin has to do with worms they could not have told you. They both were certain that, for the best results, chickens should be born in the new moon; for, if they were born in the full moon or the old moon, they would have no vitality. Marinette claimed that the old moon was the worse—that then the chicks hadn't even strength to break their shells, and drowned in them.

On this Sunday morning, the Widow Marcotte urgently felt the need of some one in whom to confide her troubles, to which there seemed to be no end—all the more so, since she was sure that several people she saw standing in the open space in front of the church after mass were gossiping about her as she passed. At least, it looked suspiciously like it. For when she approached, they had ostentatiously turned their backs to her and talked in low tones until she was around the corner. She made her way down the Road of the Madonna, past the lame blacksmith's, past the little doctor's, and Germaine's garden, until she came to the large, clean flag-

stone in front of Marinette's house, which hugged the road.

The door was ajar; but her eyes were so full of the noon sun that she could see nothing; nor could she hear any sound. She was about to go around the house and look among the out-buildings when she heard Marinette's voice raised in expostulation:

"Nani! Nani! Nani!" (Which is patois for "No! No! No!")

Whereupon, Minou, the cat, came tumbling out the door in wild disorder, her yellow fur ruffled, her tail high in air. Immediately afterwards, Marinette's big bulk filled the doorway, a belligerent broom in her hand. Then she saw the widow. Now, usually, Marinette had a jovial welcome for her friend; but to-day Marinette did not even smile as she invited her in. The lips of her generous mouth were pressed into a grim line; and when the two sat down, she kept slowly rubbing her big hands together as if she had something on her mind.

The widow had come for comfort; but now, looking at Marinette, it occurred to her that perhaps it was her business to cheer her friend, instead.

"You look as if you had killed your pet pig!" She smiled; but, getting no response except a mournful shake of the head, exclaimed, "You are serious!"

"It is nothing," Marinette replied. She seemed about to speak further; but nothing came.

It was clear to the widow that this was a case where her friend's mind must be diverted. So she went on to tell how she had made the mistake this year of planting her potatoes in the new moon, so that, as a result,

they had all gone into leaves; and how, also, she had neglected to let a Friday pass after the new moon before transplanting her cabbages, which, therefore, were not doing so well as usual.

Still Marinette did not seem disposed to speak. She was gazing steadfastly at a little depression in the dirt floor. Finally, she turned and put her huge hand on the Widow Marcotte's knee:

"You will hear it sooner or later. People are saying things about you and that Cocharaux. Sidonie told me. She heard it from Madame Capéran, where she was sewing."

The Widow Marcotte's face lost its color. The cowards! The Dastes had done this thing! She summoned her courage to hear the rest. She must know the worst. Tremblingly she heard herself ask:

"What is it—what is it they say?"

"Well . . . they say that you do not have to pay Cocharaux for the plowing and spraying he does for you. That's about all. Except that his wife is so homely that he is not to be blamed."

The poor widow was so astounded that she could not speak. She looked at Marinette incredulously. The blood rushed back to her face. Marinette tried to laugh it off:

"After all, it is nothing. Your friends will not believe it. . . ."

"Nothing! It is everything! I shall have no friends! Oh!" The widow burst into sobs. "Oh, what shall I do! What shall I do!" she moaned. Marinette roughly took her hands. Then, after awhile:

"I told Sidonie it was Leo Daste's dirty work—be-

cause of the land. . . . Your son. Can't he do anything?"

"What can he do? What can anybody do? He has been so angry at the Dastes already that he would have done something terrible if I hadn't stopped him. When he hears of this, I don't know what will happen! Merciful Virgin! What have I done, what have I done to deserve all this! . . . I tell you, Marinette, I pay Cocharaux good wages. Anybody that says differently lies!"

"There, there! Perhaps the best thing is to pay no attention. What is empty talk like that? It will die down in a week. People will know it is only Leo Daste up to his mean tricks again. Everybody says the Dastes are a worthless lot. Just ignore it. That's the best way."

The Widow Marcotte dragged herself home as best she could. She had to rest twice as she climbed the hill to her house.

When she finally reached there, she could eat no dinner. She went into the tiny room off the kitchen where was the wide bed, with its yellow canopy, and the heavy, square bureau. She laid her *missel* on the bureau; removed her new hat and put it on the bed; and exchanged her cord-soled shoes for her sabots. Coming back into the kitchen, a glance at the tall clock in the corner told her that it was after one o'clock. She must have been at Marinette's a long time! Mechanically, she shuffled over to the fireplace where she had left a kettle of soup over the smoldering embers, and was about to put on more wood when she paused. What was the use? No, she could not eat. She was not hungry. Perhaps some wine—she half filled a glass

from the bottle on the table, then went over by the stone sink where a red jug sat on the dirt floor—a low, big-bellied jug with a spout—and filled the rest of the glass with water.

Then, although she was rarely idle, the Widow Marcotte sat for a long time at her open door, staring at the garden across the road, thinking of her dead husband, whose favorite flowers were the dahlias now flaunting themselves in the sun.

IV

For a week after this, nothing happened, except that the Dastes' cock—an exceptionally insolent bird, with a great crest, which Leo Daste prized highly—jumped over the fence into the Widow Marcotte's yard and got signally worsted in a fight with a cock half his size. When he returned to his own hens, he pretended victory, crowing lustily and strutting about; but he was a sorry sight, his head covered with blood, his crest torn, his neck and tail feathers partly gone. . . . The Widow Marcotte, hearing no more about the gossip—her son had not even mentioned it—began to persuade herself that, after all, people had taken this scurrilous talk for its real value, and that, as Marinette assured her, it would react upon the Dastes rather than upon her. The just God surely would not permit her to suffer from a lie like that!

Then, on the very next market day, early in the morning, the terrible thing, the monstrous thing happened. The widow did not become aware of it as soon as the neighbors. She had seen pass that morning the

women-folks of the Pondes, and the Barbets, and the Boussaguets, and the Fourteaus, their water-jugs on their heads, on their way to the lane at the foot of the road leading to the spring. It puzzled her that they each and all stopped when they got a little beyond her garden, then looked back at her house, then at Cocharaux's house just ahead. Even when they went on, they kept looking back. She noticed with growing perplexity that the Fourteaus and the Barbets came back together, talking excitedly, and laughing. She was in her yard then and started out to exchange the time of day; but they hurried by as if they did not see her. The poor widow followed them with staring eyes, her mouth open. What had happened? She stepped out the gate into the road. Then, she saw! Along the center of the road, from her own gate to the gate of Cocharaux, a hectometer down, a wide path of chicken feathers was strewn.

Now, in Gascony, that means only one thing. A "strewing" between the houses of a man and a woman is a public accusation of the sort that nobody can mistake. Its motive may be malice, or ridicule, or both; but to a decent woman, it becomes the most dastardly of all conceivable insults. To the Widow Marcotte, as she looked down the road toward Cocharaux's gate, it was the final, the ultimate catastrophe, too awful even to believe. With growing terror, she looked again. Yes, there it was. It was not an illusion. It was a fact. From her gate to that of her neighbor, was an unbroken path of feathers.

Her first impulse was to rush and gather them up. But already a cart was in sight, coming down the road.

She ran into the house and shut the door. The cart passed by. It was Lagarde, who kept the merchandise store. He stopped and looked at the feathers, then at the two houses, laughed, and finally drove on. Where was Cocharaux? She suddenly remembered that he and his wife had gone to Averon the day before with their ox-team to do some work in the vineyards there. She hurried out with a broom and looked up and down the road. No one was in sight. In a few minutes she had scattered the feathers right and left. She dared not take much time at it. Some one might come. When she had done it, she reflected that it was too late. The harm was already accomplished. It would be all over the village in another hour.

The Widow Marcotte kept to her house all that day. People passing saw that the rude, unpainted door, which Cocharaux had made, was fast shut. No face appeared at the window on either side. She dared not show herself. She did not even go into the yard until after dark. For the first time in a year, she did not occupy her place in the market selling her vegetables. Late in the afternoon, when her son came, she opened the door to him only after he had knocked persistently and called to her. Strange to say, he had not heard of the strewing. Probably, he was the only one in the whole commune that had not heard of it. They had kept it from him. She had to tell him of this fearful thing herself—her own son, she, his mother, had to tell him! He was beside himself with rage. He strode over to the Daste house and, finding Leo Daste in the yard, accused him. He broke out with a torrent of foul language. Félix Marcotte made a rush at him. But Daste, who was a

big, burly fellow, knocked him down. Félix was helpless. He swore a terrible vengeance, when and how he did not know. He went to see the mayor, who did not consider the matter of great importance. At any rate, it appeared that nothing could be done.

Tuesday noon, Cocharaux came home with his oxen. When he came over, the widow would not let him in. That night, after dark, Marinette walked up from the village to see her. Her sympathy was genuine—also her indignation—but how could that help? The fact that she waited until after dark was the significant, the ominous thing. It showed that even she, Marinette, her best friend, was ashamed to be seen visiting the Widow Marcotte!

A few days later, the widow's son began to be alarmed. It occurred to him that his mother was acting strangely, as if she was not quite right in her head. He had nothing definite to go upon; but there were little things that so often mean a great deal. Usually so neat in her dress, she seemed suddenly to have become careless and almost slatternly. She let her white waist-strings hang out over her black dress in front. Her hair was not combed. One evening, when he got through with his route a little earlier than usual, he was astounded, as he approached the house, to hear her singing. He crept close to the door and listened. It was a patois song which he remembered as a favorite of his father's:

The Passeillo has a wife;
The neighbors are jealous of her;
They truss her up and put her in little packages!

Up! La, la, lan de rideto!
Up! La, la, lan derida!

He went in. He stayed to supper. He noticed that, in setting the table, his mother lay out some pewter knives and forks which she and his father used when he was little. They had been put away a long time. At supper, he observed a soup plate at one end of the table upside down. He asked:

"What on earth is that?"

"Nothing. Don't look at it!"

Later, when her back was turned, he lifted up the plate and looked. He found a big hole burnt into the wood of the table. He extracted the truth from her little by little. The night before, she had been afraid. Was it the thunder? Perhaps. Anyway, she had taken the large candle which was a souvenir of his own first communion, set it on the table without a candlestick, lit it, and had gone to sleep over her prayers. When she woke up, the room was dark and there was the smell of burning wood. . . . She had not wanted him to see the hole. He might think that she was not capable of being alone in the house.

Félix Marcotte looked at his mother a long time. In his eyes was a growing wonder and fear.

V

The following Monday, the Widow Marcotte's body was discovered by her son in the pond at the end of the garden across the road. She was lying flat in the water, her face down, all of her body submerged except one

foot, which was trailing upon the bank. One of her sabots had floated out to the middle of the pond, blown there, no doubt, by the wind. Near her, under the willow tree, was her old wheelbarrow, full of clothes for the rinsing; but none of them had been taken out.

Now, one does not drown by accident in a pond only two or three feet deep. Even if one fell in, one could easily scramble out again. And the Widow Marcotte was not so old and infirm as all that! Yes, the whole thing was clear enough to most people: the many troubles of the Widow Marcotte had crazed her, and so she had ended her life.

This was Hippolyte's opinion, as he expressed it the day of the funeral to his old friend, the Abbé Pierre. He ventured surprise that she was to be given Christian burial. All of which disturbed the Abbé considerably—he who felt keen sorrow over the whole affair.

"You, too, Hippolyte! No! It is impossible! All her life, the Widow Marcotte was a devout daughter of the Church. I know that in her heart was a great love for the good God. To take her own life! Why, it would mean the supreme rebellion against Him! No, Hippolyte, I agree with her son; she had one of her spells and fell into the pond and was drowned before she could help herself."

Hippolyte thought a moment. Then:

"Well, it's a terrible thing. Everybody says that Leo Daste is to blame—that he hounded her to death. Yet, I ask you this: who will punish him? No one, I suppose . . . except God!" (Hippolyte stopped and looked sidewise at the Abbé.) "But, mark my words, Pierre,

He will do nothing to Leo Daste. At least, not in this world," added Hippolyte.

Yet, one week later, in the middle of a clear night, when the wind was sweeping the valley, the Dastes' barn mysteriously caught fire and burned until only the broken walls of stone and clay were left. If his wife had perished in the flames, it would have been dreadful enough for Leo Daste. But his oxen! Do what they could, they could not get them out of the stables in time to save them. . . . There is no fire department in Aignan. True, they have a pump at the *mairie* for forcing water through a hose; but it doesn't work. They did not sound the tocsin, for the fire was too far away from the village. A line of men frantically passed endless buckets of water to the conflagration; but, strangely enough, the water from the widow's pond would not put the fire out. Some said it burned all the faster.

Whether this fire was an act of God or not, nobody could tell.

XV

THE GAY CURÉ OF AVERON

(As Told in a Letter from the Abbé Pierre to his Old Friend, the Abbé Rivoire, at Baillon, near Paris)

I have just been over to Averon to see the Abbé Picot.

Let me tell you about this young curé. The story will show you how wrong we are in our hasty judgments of our fellow men—only, its moral will be lost on you, my dear Laurent, who are always so patient with everybody and who never said an unkind word in your life, even of an enemy.

If the Abbé Picot could walk in upon you in that sunny little court of yours, you would see a striking figure of a man: tall, slender, erect, pleasant-looking in spite of a face very thin, yes, almost emaciated. You would notice the hectic spots of color at the tip of his cheek bones against an otherwise dark skin. No matter how closely he shaves, his black beard shows; and yet over this dark complexion a translucent pallor spreads, as if the light of a candle were suffused through parchment. His long black hair is carelessly thrown back from his forehead; his lips are thin and have a whimsical quirk to them; look at his eyes, and you see an alert twinkle, making you feel that he is on the eve of a witty thought or remark. He is quick and jerky in

his movements, and his long, rapid stride is not at all like the sedate walk which one might expect of a priest.

This Abbé Picot came to Averon as curé only about two years ago; and yet, even in that short time, I am sorry to say, he has achieved a reputation that is not good for a priest. You can imagine what I mean when I tell you that the people about the country here speak of him as "the gay curé." In any gathering of people you are apt to hear amusing gossip about "that gay curé over in Averon," in which you will learn that he actually has an automobile which he drives much too fast, and, to cap the climax, is apt to race about the country bareheaded, his hair blown about by the wind. You will also hear that there are endless persons who have seen him smoking cigarettes—indeed, I myself witnessed him lighting one in front of the little doctor's house in our village, just as he was leaving to ride off in his Citroën. I noticed that he flung the match away with a flip and a flourish, like any finished man of the world. My Aunt Madeleine told me that it was common gossip that, in his dining room, he had a wonderful, carved table which had once belonged to the actress, Réjane, and which he had bought at a second-hand dealer's for a song; and she had also heard one woman say that the Abbé Picot was on excellent terms with "the holy water he kept in his cellar." However, that was simply idle and malicious talk, I was certain. This is true, though, for he told me himself: When his father died—they lived near Bordeaux—he left some two hundred bottles of a rare armagnac over a century old. A year ago, the young Abbé needed money, so he sold all but a few of these bottles to a merchant in Bordeaux

for 40 francs apiece. This merchant in turn sold them to a Paris *restaurateur* for 100 francs a bottle. Now, this astute Parisian, who had a discerning *clientèle,* printed some new labels, which he stuck on the bottles. And what do you think? These astounding labels boldly read:

THE ARMAGNAC
OF
THE CURÉ OF AVERON

and the price had become 200 francs a bottle—five times the amount the Abbé Picot had sold them for in the first place!

When I asked the Abbé Picot how he found this out, he coughed in that irritating way of his—he was always stopping to cough, a sort of mannerism, I concluded—and related that he himself had entered this very restaurant in Paris one evening, and, after his dinner, had ordered some armagnac with his coffee, specifying that it must be of the very choicest. What was his astonishment to be confronted by the waiter with his own brandy, labeled with his own name, and at a price which he could not by any means afford, even for one little drink! When he told me this, I expected him to show some anger; first, at having the name of his holy office bandied about on bottles, and, second, for having sold his armagnac so cheap. But, strange to say, he only professed to see the humor of it, and laughed as if it were the pleasantest jest in the world. When I told him he should have had the labels altered at once, he looked at me in a surprised way and said that it was no use—that there was no law that would

cover it. But the point is, he did not seem to care overmuch one way or another.

I must frankly confess that this and all these other things prejudiced me against the man. Surely, we priests, who should order our lives in every particular for the glory of God, cannot be expected to look with favor upon one who seems to cast discredit upon us!

Still, you are aware, I hope, that I try to be just. You yourself, through all my association with you, have helped to teach me that very thing. I have been getting a little ahead of my story, for the Abbé Picot told me all this about the armagnac only when I went to see him the first time—I suppose it was about six months past—let me see, this is October; it was April, then—six months ago. My errand was to borrow a book—a volume of St. Ambroise, which I had heard that this Abbé Picot possessed, in the Latin text. Averon is to the north of us, some seven or eight kilometers by the road, so I drove over in my cart—the one I wrote you I purchased, second-hand. Which reminds me: I may be old-fashioned, and I do not want to criticize; but it always disturbs my sense of decorum to see a priest riding about on a bicycle, as is so frequently the custom here in my country. I hold that any man, astride one of these machines, his feet moving around in circles, his knees rising and falling like pistons, is a sufficiently unprepossessing sight. But a priest! It is still more ridiculous for him, since, on account of his cassock, he cannot conveniently manage a bicycle intended for males, but has to propel himself through space on the sort made especially for the skirts of women. All of this probably shows what narrow prejudices I have; but,

at any rate, I am glad I have a cart and my mare, Poule, who gets me over the ground in a manner more befitting our calling.

Averon is a little village with only about 500 souls—about half as large as Aignan. You get to it by a winding road that leads along the side of the Forest of Aignan, and then on through Margouet, beyond which you pass two old windmills in a field; then up a long hill, until, before you realize it, you find yourself in the very center of the village—for to reach it at all is to arrive in the middle of it. There are the merchandise store and post-office on the left and the church on the right, with a herd of geese leisurely strutting about on the grassy stretch in front of it. The church is very old and built of large stones of irregular shapes, from between which the mortar has been worn by the weather—indeed, you would say that the walls were about to crumble with age. And yet that would be nonsense, for they have looked that way so many centuries that nobody has any fear. The heavy square tower in front has a clock that actually runs; but the slender iron cross that surmounts the *clocher* tips crazily to the north. It formerly tipped to the south, and they tried to fix it with a rope, making a slip-noose and throwing it over the top of the cross; but they pulled it too far the other way, and there it is, worse than ever, not to speak of the rope still dangling from it, since nobody could ever manage to dislodge it.

I first went on beyond the post-office to the Abbé Picot's house, in front of which I tied Poule; but when I knocked at the door, the old woman said he was at the church. So, back I walked to the church and went

around under the trees, by the statue of the Virgin, to the entrance porch on the side, where I encountered the young curé just coming out—one could almost say, dashing out, he came so fast. He was bareheaded and his cassock was half open in front and not buttoned properly. When he saw me, he greeted me in his quick, nervous way and seemed genuinely glad to see me, although we had met only casually once before. I told him my errand about the book; but he insisted upon my going into the church with him, in spite of the fact that I had been in it many times before, all the while keeping up a running fire of talk of how the church was once burned by the Protestants five hundred years ago —something which I knew all about, although it is sufficiently doubtful. He showed me the walls, painted in dingy white and gold, to imitate draperies, and the high altar with its gilded carvings of wood. Then he reached under the altar-cloth and fished out the key of the sacristy—a huge key, which he jestingly called "the key to Heaven"—a jest with no point in it whatever. If one had never been in this sacristy, one would be astonished to see the ample closets of fine woodwork and the array of long, wide drawers, which he proceeded to pull out one by one, to show me the vestments, which are extraordinarily rich with fine laces and embroideries of silver and gold. He took them all out and displayed them with great pride, especially one which he said had cost at least four thousand francs, and which he had worn last at Easter. I expressed my surprise, since the parish is known to be a fairly poor one; at which he smiled and said, soberly:

"These were bought a long time ago. At present—

well, we have everything here, now, except money."

I was really in a hurry to get back home, for I had several people to visit on the way, and I hinted as much. Immediately, he was full of regrets for having detained me so long in the church, and, as soon as he could lock the sacristy and replace the key, we were on the way to his house. He walked so fast that I could hardly keep up with him. I ventured to ask him if he had not forgotten his hat, for the sun was high; but he laughed and said he had left it at home. I narrowly noticed the people we passed to see how they took him, and must acknowledge that they greeted him with apparent respect. If they smiled a little, it was because he smiled at them in a cheerful way which could not but provoke a smile in return. When we had reached his house, he left me in the large room which serves as his living room, kitchen, and dining room. I thought he would never come back, he was gone so long. I had plenty of time to regard that long, carved table which gossip said once belonged to Réjane, the actress. It was a beautiful piece of work.

After a while, he returned, bearing in his two hands that tome of St. Ambroise I had come to get, and laid it on the table. I was delighted to see it. It was indeed the Latin text I had sought, bound in rich, red leather, with the title on the back in gold letters:

SANCTI
AMBROSII
MEDIOLANENSIS
EPISCOPI
OPERA

It was the edition of 1614, printed in Paris. On the title-page was the woodcut of a ship, on whose sails was figured the *fleur-de-lis*. But, now, attend! While I was reverently turning the pages of this rare volume, which I would have given much to possess, he astonished me by saying:

"It is only by chance that St. Ambroise is still lodged with me. You remember that tall young American, Monsieur Ware, who visited these parts last summer?"

So he had known David Ware—he who married our Germaine! I had not realized that—yet, it was likely enough, since this American was forever exploring all our villages round about. I asked in surprise:

"What had Monsieur Ware to do with it?"

"Well, it was this way, Monsieur le Curé. I had still a bottle or two of my father's very old armagnac, most of which I had sold." (He went on to tell me all about that.) "Before Monsieur Ware left for Havre and the ship that was to bear him back to his country, I offered him one of those very bottles to take home with him. But I learned then from him the astounding fact that they have passed a law in America which makes it that no one may drink our armagnac unless it is with great secrecy. I was amazed that such a thing could be, and, also, I was extremely regretful, for I wished to show Monsieur Ware my very good will. Then I remembered. He had much admired some of my old books —especially this tome of St. Ambroise here, as well as another, the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas. I made bold to ask him which of the two he would have. He pointed to St. Thomas; but he laughed and added, 'No, it is too big to carry; how I wish I could take the

armagnac instead!' And then he sighed, 'It is no use. One could not get it into America.'

"But when he had departed, I decided that Monsieur Ware should have his St. Thomas in any event. Even a thick tome of 1,368 pages and a third of a meter high can be posted. And a book by St. Thomas is, I assume, not yet a violation of the laws of that strange America! So I carefully wrap it up in thick paper, tie it many times with a strong string, take it to our postmaster, Monsieur Boussaguet, and, *voilà!* it is done. Of course, I am sorry to lose my tome, which is rare. As I say, it might have been St. Ambroise!"

At which, he laughed, and then began coughing in that annoying way of his.

I was still turning the leaves of St. Ambroise as he was saying all this, and I fear that I was a little put out. Think of it! A priest—a priest, mind you—that would give away a rare edition of St. Thomas! I simply could not understand a thing like that. And Monsieur Ware a foreigner—an American—whom he had met only casually! Why, even I, who knew Monsieur Ware so well and who had grown to like him very much, could never have brought myself to part with a precious tome like that—no, no, no!—especially to one who is not of the Faith, one who would have absolutely no use for St. Thomas except, perhaps, to exhibit him about as a curiosity! And add to that, Monsieur Ware had frankly preferred a paltry bottle of brandy anyway!

I did not even dare to speak for a moment. I was thinking of that precious volume of the Angelic Doctor, with its double columns of fine, clear type, with its gold title on the back printed on a square of white skin,

and the title-page in red and black. Then it occurred to me that it might not have been this splendid edition, which I myself have wanted so long—ah, Laurent, we are all selfish, I fear!—yes, I began to hope that it was some cheaper copy, such as I have; so I asked him if the title-page was in red and black letters, with the wood-cut of a man with a lyre in the midst of a city only half-built, and the legend, *Harmonia Surgunt;* and he acknowledged that it was the same. I kept my temper as well as I knew how, and all I said was:

"It is a pity!"

At which he smiled ruefully and replied, "Yes, I fear it was a needless sacrifice. You see, I have had no letter from Monsieur Ware to thank me, which makes my happy thought of no avail. Ah, these Americans!"

I hastened to tell him that Monsieur Ware was not like all Americans—that he was a man of culture, and would certainly have thanked him for the book if he had ever received it. I also mentioned that Monsieur Ware was to come back to visit us by another summer, bringing Germaine with him, and at that time he could be questioned about the matter. But I did not prolong the conversation. I was still too indignant to trust what I might say. But see what happened just as I was leaving! The Abbé Picot had come out to the road and watched me climb into my cart, when, suddenly, he exclaimed:

"But you have forgotten your St. Ambroise!"

To be sure, I had been so perturbed that the whole object of my errand to Averon had slipped my mind. So he bade me wait while he hurried back into the house. Soon he emerged with the book bundled up in an old

newspaper. When he handed it to me, he said this astounding thing—I could hardly believe my ears:

"If Monsieur le Curé will be so good as to accept it, he may add this tome to his library. The book is his."

Imagine a priceless gift like that, my dear Laurent, from a man who was not only a practical stranger to me, but from a man I had learned to dislike more than I cared to admit! What could I do? I remonstrated; but when I insisted upon my refusal, it seemed to offend him; so, finally, I thanked him, although no thanks could ever be enough for a gift like that! I also justified my conscience by the thought that perhaps I was saving this splendid tome from a worse fate; for if he could treat St. Thomas as he had, what might he not do with St. Ambroise?

Oh, I forgot to tell you another thing which increased my prejudice against the man. Just before I left, he asked me if I would not taste some of his famous armagnac, of which he still had a little left. Before I could decline, he was already crossing the floor toward a cupboard, and I thought he walked a little unsteadily. I drew my own conclusions. He had been out of the room a long time while I had waited for that volume of St. Ambroise! While he was putting the key in the lock of the cupboard-door, I risked hurting his feelings by saying that I would refrain from accepting his hospitality at this time, as I must hasten. He reluctantly withdrew the key and came back toward me. Before he reached the table, he suddenly reeled, and had to sit down in the nearest chair. I thought (God forgive me!) that he was under the influence of drink!

Now, the sequel of all this is the important thing.

As I said in the first place, it amply shows how mistaken one may be in one's hasty judgments of one's fellowmen.

That the Abbé Picot made visits to our village often enough to cause comment would not have come to my notice except for my Aunt Madeleine, who knows everything that goes on. Let me mention that Fitte, the *notaire,* has frequently said that what we need is a weekly newspaper in our commune; but I assure you, my dear friend, that for me it is wholly unnecessary. A newspaper would only be a poor duplication of what my Aunt Madeleine is able to tell me. When I heard of the young curé's continual visits here, I was naturally surprised. I knew he did not come to see me; and I was still more surprised when I was informed by Lignac, the blacksmith, that his automobile was sometimes seen in the driveway of the little doctor, on the Road of the Madonna. You will remember that is where I had caught a glimpse of him the time when he was lighting his cigarette so nonchalantly.

Well, last week I myself was walking by the doctor's house just as the doctor was driving out into the road. He stopped a moment outside the gates, saying that he was going over to Averon, and offering to take me if I was headed for that direction. I thanked him and told him no; that the last time I went to Averon was in the spring, when I had gone to see the Abbé Picot. Then he amazed me by saying:

"He is quite ill. In fact, he is no longer able to come to me, so I must go to him."

When I could gather my wits, I took the liberty of asking him if it was serious. To my surprise, he said

that it was. I could not help asking him further if he could tell me what was the trouble, although I know that doctors do not like to discuss the maladies of their patients. I thought at first that he was not going to answer me. He reflected for a moment, pursed his lips, and then, while manipulating the gears of his car, replied in his brusque way, *"Phtisie!"* and suddenly went on.

I stood there in the middle of the road stupefied. People had called him "the gay curé!" The "gay" curé, indeed! And all this time he had been slowly dying, actually dying, of consumption! So that was what that hacking cough of his had meant—that nervous cough that I had allowed to irritate me! The gay curé of Averon! What irony! And gossips had blamed him for being out on the road so much in his automobile—bareheaded, that he might get the sun! What would they say if they knew that this was his way of trying to get well—the air and sunshine, the precious air and sunshine, which, presently, he would know no more!

And I, a fellow-priest, was worse than any of them. That time I called on him and he became suddenly faint and walked unsteadily and had to sit down—alas, what thoughts I had permitted myself to think! Gay? This young man, fighting for his life with outward cheer, when only God knew what was in his heart. Fighting death with a smile!

When I told my Aunt Madeleine, she was all pity at once, although she had been as full of the thoughtless gossip as anybody. The upshot of it was that she said that I must go and see him. She added that she would send with me a jar of her currant jelly, which she had

put up with her own hands. But, even without her urging, I should have gone. So, this morning I harnessed Poule and drove over the hills to Averon. With what different sentiments this time I passed through the main street of the village, past the church, surmounted with its rickety cross! At the little *Bureau de Poste,* I turned on the left and was soon at the *presbytère.* The same old woman came to the door and I found myself again in the living room where I had last seen this unfortunate young priest. While the woman excused herself for a few moments to prepare the Abbé for my call, I glanced at that table which had belonged to the actress, Réjane—I had just placed Aunt Madeleine's jar of jelly there—and I could not help admiring its excellent proportions. It occurred to me that if I were buying a table at a second-hand store, I would no doubt buy this one. Quite possibly it was about as cheap as any, and much more beautiful, so why blame the man for it? As I stood there, I could hear his familiar hacking cough from beyond the wall.

I don't suppose you ever saw a room just like the one into which I was shown a few minutes later, and which serves as the Abbé Picot's bedroom and study. There are bookcases all one side of the wall, filled with not only the books one naturally expects a priest to have, but books which show that my young friend has many interests outside theology. Evidently his is one of those minds which interest themselves in a multitude of things. There is a whole row of volumes about plants and animals; then, tilted up on a bookcase is a square board on which hundreds of butterflies are mounted; I noticed on a table in the corner a glass jar with sev-

eral snakes preserved in some liquid or other. On another table near by are brushes and a palette; and, on the wall I saw a painting, quite good, of the church from the south side, where the trees are. I began to wonder what else this exceptional young man could do, when I espied a violin lying on one of the shelves among the books.

I am telling you all this entirely out of the order of things, so that you will get the setting. Of course, when I first entered, I noticed none of these objects, my attention naturally being directed to the bed, which had been pulled out a little from the wall, so that it exactly faced a window, through which one could see the branches of a chestnut tree against a blue sky. The Abbé Picot was there on the bed, bolstered up with pillows. When he saw me, he smiled, extended his long, thin hand, asking my pardon for not getting up to receive me.

"This is the first time I have ever been ill enough to go to bed," he remarked, as if it were more or less of a jest. "To-morrow, I shall be up and out again," he added lightly. At that, he was seized with a convulsion of coughing, which brought his old servant into the room in a hurry. It grew worse and worse; and each time the old woman wiped his lips, I could see that the cloth was stained with blood. After that, he sank back on the pillows exhausted and closed his eyes, until I was certain he had forgotten my presence, which was just as well. I remained in my chair where I was, hoping that he would go to sleep, so that I might slip out without disturbing him; for, evidently, it was his talking which had made him cough. Ah, Laurent, you

should have seen his face—the face of the young Abbé Picot—in repose! Up to now, I had seen it only when it was animated, usually with that brave smile with which he tried to fool the world. Now, wholly relaxed, it was an entirely different face. It was thinner than ever. The skin was tightly drawn over the bones, and would have been as white as his pillow except for the shadow of his unshaved beard, which, strangely enough, made it look whiter still. His black hair was thrown back in a tangled wave from his high forehead; his long eyelids wearily covered his eyes, beneath which were tragically dark crescents; and his pathetic lips, so wont to smile, seemed to express, as no words could, the pent-up suffering of all mankind. It was as though through them the heart of an agonized world cried out to God—cried out with the dreadful cry that makes no sound.

When I thought he was asleep, I tiptoed out as gently as I could. I was of no use here. The servant was in the kitchen. She said that these attacks were nothing new; only, they came much oftener of late.

I do not remember climbing into my cart or driving back through the village. I remember, though, that about a kilometer down the road toward home, I found myself talking half aloud, a thing for which you have sometimes rallied me, when I have forgotten myself. I was thinking of how little I really had ever heard against him, and yet how harsh I had been in my judgment of him, mostly for a selfish reason, too—because he had parted with that tome of St. Thomas, which I had coveted too much; and, even in this, he was doing Monsieur Ware what he thought was a kind deed. There

is this to say too: he knew that he would have no use for his books much longer.

Ah, the blessed St. François, he who was gay in his youth and who welcomed death with a song—do you remember how he once said that they who keep watch over the perfection of their life ought to cleanse themselves with floods of tears? With tears, Laurent, through which the eyes are purified, that they may avail us the better to see God!

XVI

COURROU PLAYS THE CORNET

The Gascon autumn was fading slowly into winter. The last grapes had been gathered from the vineyards, and the fair, sleek body of the luscious fruit had been crushed and mangled, that its soul, darkly imprisoned in huge tuns, might slowly awaken to new and miraculous life. Out in the country, the peasants assembled in each others' barns to husk the maize, refreshing themselves with new wine and boiled chestnuts, or pausing to dance a vigorous round, singing, as they danced, some old Gascon song, such as:

Turn the leg of mutton, turn the leg of mutton,
Turn the leg of mutton, the mutton on the fire!

And over—and over
And over—and over—and over!

With joyful abandon the chorus increased in speed, as the willing feet of the girls and their gallants moved ever faster and faster, until, at last, all rhythm was lost in a delightful tumult of shouts and laughter.

At length the time came when the leaves of the vineyards turned yellow and red and fell with the frosts. Along the borders of the winding streams the long ranks of tall poplars rose stark and barren. High up against

the sky to the north, the forest, aflame no more with reds and golds, but dark and forbidding, stood, a grim barrier against winter winds; and the blue smoke of the charcoal-burner, rising from its base, was as incense mounting to some sylvan god. The villages far and wide, each at home on its immemorial hill, were no longer screened from one another by their wealth of trees; boldly they looked about them at their sister villages, some with pride, some with envy, and some with indifference; the bells in their *clochers* answered each other more loudly and distinctly through the frosty air, as if they vied to see which should send farthest the praises of the good God.

In the village of Aignan, out on the Road of the Madonna, the statue of the Virgin cast a longer and longer shadow before her as the sun rose less and less high in the heavens. Over in the little doctor's garden, the songs of the blackbirds and finches and linnets had ceased; of all the birds, only a few chickadees and titmice remained—yes, and the saucy *rouge-gorge,* with its breast blood-red. As the year waned to its dying, the last petals of the last roses faded and fell one by one on the deserted paths.

But, although by Christmas time this garden looked dead and forsaken, bare of any bloom except the simple white flower of the *rose de noël,* there was unwonted life and activity in one of the great stone barns at the back of the driveway. The doors were wide open to let in the light of the sun, and there three women were busily plucking the geese that had been killed that very morning. Great, portly geese they were, ten of them; and no wonder they looked sleek and prosperous! For dur-

ing the last six weeks the best of corn had been forced down their long necks through funnels, and they had been kept in a small inclosure so that they should not walk about and lose their wealth of fat. One of the women, old Marinette, had bled the geese herself, carefully saving the blood, which, as everybody knows, makes a delicious dish when fried and properly seasoned. The women gossiped as they worked, and the soft mountain of feathers grew higher and higher, to be sorted later, the best to be kept and the rest to be sold to the *chiffonnier* the next time he made his rounds. When the geese had all been plucked and singed, and dressed, and the precious livers set aside, they were taken up to the house and suspended from the high rafters at the end of the big kitchen, where their golden bodies, all in a row, brought up delightful visions of many a feast to come.

But if any one thinks they will be put into an oven and roasted whole just as they are, he is mistaken. Oh, no; that is not the Gascon way of treating geese, whatever they may do in other countries! After they had hung in the kitchen for several days, the real work began. A good fire was built in the vast fireplace, and kettles were made ready. The geese were then cut into pieces under the skillful direction of the doctor's mother-in-law, Madame Sance, who knew more about such things than anybody else. After that, they were put in the kettles over the fire and partially cooked. At the same time, in huge cauldrons, the fat was being rendered. Then, when all was done, the pieces were packed one by one in tall, yellow earthenware jars, and over these the boiling fat was poured to the brim. The car-

casses, and the necks, and the tips of the wings, and the feet were not wasted. No, they were put into brine, to be used for soup; only, before the soup was ever served, they would be taken out and broiled on a gridiron. Delicious!

There were two jars to which Madame Sance gave her personal attention. In them she had put the choicest pieces she could find. When the jars were lifted to their places on the long shelves that hung from the ceiling, she saw to it that these two were put in a special place at the end. Then she smiled her rare smile and said:

"We'll have those when Germaine comes!"

Ah, yes, when the roses bloomed again and the birds sang once more in the garden, Germaine would be here; she, whom Monsieur Ware had taken away to that far-off America and whom the fond mother longed to see as she longed for nothing else! When one gets old, one cannot tell what will happen.

After the geese were put up, the weather became colder. There was little snow that winter; but the cold was damp and penetrating and the west winds often blew, so there was much rain. There came a time late in January when the highways were frozen and when the doctor, coming in from the country, was glad to stand at the kitchen fire and thaw himself out. He was very busy these days. There was much sickness; and it kept not only the doctor occupied, but Abbé Pierre as well. Poule had little rest. She could often be seen pulling her master in the high-wheeled cart that rattled over the hard roads. Once in a while, when some one was sick to death in the village, a choir boy went ahead

of the Abbé, ringing his bell, at which the people they passed bared their heads, and the lips of the pious moved in prayer. With much sadness the Abbé noticed that old Simon, his father, was feebler than he had ever been, and did not venture out as much as usual, spending hours in his chair by the kitchen fire, pretending to read the paper, but often gazing into vacancy. Sometimes, his white head nodded until he was fast asleep. Eighty-eight years!

One morning, late in February, the Abbé was walking along in the middle of the Street of the Church. He was lost in reflection. His eyes were on the ground, and he even neglected to notice the greeting of Sarrade, the sabot-maker, who was standing in his doorway. As the Abbé neared his former place of residence, a little farther on, he became suddenly aware of a strident sound which resolved itself into the notes of the musical scale, clear and piercing-sweet, arranging themselves miraculously into the lilting runs and happy trippings of an unmistakable melody. When he came opposite his father's old doorway, the music assailed his ear with such care free abandon and startling boldness that his reveries were at last utterly shattered. He looked within and saw old Courrou, the harness-maker, with his cornet to his lips, his withered cheeks swelled out, his face transfigured, his right foot beating time to the merry tune he was playing. The Abbé passed on. Something dimly stirred in his mind—something mysterious, elusively sweet, redolent with precious memories. When he reached the church, whither he was bound, he noticed that the sunlight shone on its walls with unwonted brightness, making the old stones seem less ancient, and

transforming the rugged tower into a shaft of glory. Up, up, his eye traveled to a sky so tenderly blue that it seemed to be calling to all things in nature and in the heart of man; even to dear dead things under the earth it called—to seeds long buried, to roots long asleep, to sap long dormant, and to human hopes long forgotten. Slowly the glad news permeated to the Abbé's heart, and he awoke to the consciousness of what it all meant.

It was spring!

Carried by an irresistible impulse, his mind agitated with a pleasant excitement, the Abbé, instead of going into the church, went around it and on, down the hill to his garden house. He let himself in through the claret-colored iron gates, walked up past the garden house, past the vineyard, and stood under the peach trees. The buds were swollen almost to bursting. The delicate pink of the coming blossoms could already be seen. The very air was scented with a chaos of glad things from earth and shrub and tree and vine.

Spring had come to Gascony!

A few weeks later, there was no doubt about it whatever in anybody's mind. Old Hippolyte found himself getting up earlier each morning, awakened by the birds, and opened wide his windows to let in the sun. Children climbed up the path to the woods and came back triumphant, bearing bunches of violets. On the sunny side of a hill, Cocharaux plowed with his oxen, his feet widespread, his wooden shoes sinking deep into the fresh soil, followed by a disorderly family of chickens looking for worms. Out on the road, old André, the road-mender, his tall figure more bowed than ever,

sledge hammer in hand, actually forgot his sorrows so far as to sing a snatch of a patois song, until he suddenly remembered, and his quavering voice faltered and stopped, and he stood motionless, looking out with dimmed eyes over the hills getting green, green! Even old Simon, the Abbé's father, began to feel better; and one morning toward the end of April ventured out, and, with the aid of his stick, walked a few steps up the sunny side of the Back Street. When he got as far as the sunlit court of the Hotel Maulezun, in which there was a garden, he paused and sniffed the air. Lilacs! He rested there quite a while; then made his way back home. Any one watching him would have noticed that, on his return, he did not lean upon his stick nearly so much, and that there was a shadow of a smile on the thin, pinched face. That very evening, the Abbé came home and told of hearing the first nightingale on the road up by the forest, a delicious *roulade* of melodious notes, as if mere sound had blossomed into riotous roses! He also told of passing the little doctor's house on the Road of the Madonna, and how he had stopped to talk with Madame Sance herself, who had informed him that she had just received a letter from Germaine that she and her husband would arrive from America only two weeks hence. Only two weeks! Think of that! Of course, none of the household could think of anything else. Madame Sance and her daughter, Madame Dousset, were now getting everything ready for the great event. That very day, they had started doing the laundry.

Now, the washing in a Gascon family is an elaborate event. It happens every six weeks or two months. It

takes the whole of two days. They use wood ashes. It is an art. One has to know how; otherwise, the clothes are ruined, and have to be done all over. Luckily, Madame Sance had a laundry woman who was an expert. First, she covered the bottom and sides of her big tub with heavy sheets—not bed sheets, but the same one puts over the oxen to keep off the flies. In this way, the ox-cloths got washed at the same time. Then she piled in the dirtiest clothes, such as the kitchen linen. After that, the other clothes. After that, another ox-cloth, to cover it all. Them came the wood ashes—she spread a thick layer of them all over the top.

Then she took a saucepan and kept pouring boiling water over the ashes. Down it went through the clothes to the bottom of the tub, where it drained out through a hole into another tub. After that, the water was boiled again and again, and poured, over, and over, and over.

That was the first day. The second day, half a dozen women went down to the *lavoir* on the way to the forest, and waited there for the laundry, which was sent along in an ox-cart to be rinsed. Madame Sance sent them their dinner at noon. After the rinsing, the clothes were hung on the hedges around the *lavoir* to dry. That evening, they all came back to the house with the laundry and were given supper in the kitchen—soup and bread, stale bread, for one never serves fresh bread in the kitchen; one couldn't afford it—it would go too fast! After supper, when they had gone away, Madame Sance, Madame Dousset, and the kitchen girl took the clothes and started folding them—they folded and folded and folded, neatly and smoothly, pressing them down with weights over night; and then, next

day, they put them out on the hedges again. Such things as had to be ironed would keep them busy for days and days; it was hoped to have all done before the coming of Germaine.

Thus, the two precious weeks passed almost before one knew it, the house echoing with incessant and happy talk about the approaching event. Every room was cleaned thoroughly. The furniture was rubbed and rubbed again, especially that in the salon, including the old Gaveau piano. The mattresses of the guest-room were opened and the raw sheep's wool taken out and beaten until it was fluffy and soft, and then put back again. The guest room itself was arranged and rearranged a score of times until at last, the great day arrived when the little doctor, dressed in his best clothes, got into his automobile, and with strident honkings started off through the village for Riscle, fifteen miles away, to meet the train on which Germaine and her David were to arrive. Abbé Pierre was just coming out of the church as the doctor went through the narrow Street of the Church, scattering a herd of geese right and left. The Abbé stood there motionless, watching the automobile as it turned around the corner to cross the Place; then he slowly made his way toward home. The coming of Germaine was an event to which he, too, looked forward with great interest. As he walked along, he thought of that night two years before when, through his wide-open shutters, he heard the clatter of the horses' hoofs and the rumble of the carriage that carried her, a newly-made bride, away from the village toward that America, so far, so incredibly far off. Well, no matter! Here she was, coming back again!

His mind went back farther still to the time when Germaine was a little girl, and he heard her recite her catechism. Her father, Jean-Louis Sance, had been his best friend in those days, and often had he seen her at the big house.

"I remember," he mused, "when she was no taller than the latch on the cellar door! Her hair hung down her back in a long, thick braid."

And then the old Abbé smiled. It might be said that he chuckled. He was thinking of the time when he had questioned the little thing about that part of the prayer, which says:

Give us this day our daily bread.

He had asked her why it was that we must pray for our bread each day—why not a week at a time? And she had answered with great seriousness:

"It might get moldy!"

Turning into his own street, the Abbé paused to admire the roses in the garden of the *facteur* across the way. This year they were more prolific than ever. From a clump of trees, the song of a blackbird came. He resumed his way.

"It is fitting that they should come back in the spring —she and David. Youth like theirs and the spring belong together."

The Abbé shook his head sadly.

"And yet," he pursued, as he passed under the lamp projecting from the corner of his house, "for us that are old, too, the spring has something to say—something too subtle for mere youth ever to comprehend!"

XVII

UNDER THE FIG TREE

The tall figure of a young man, athletic of build, with a clean-shaven, eager face and unmistakably foreign clothing, approached the gate of the Abbé's garden. The good Abbé had seen him coming down the road, and now laid aside his trowel and leisurely moved out of his flower-plot to greet him. But the young man reached the gate first.

"*Entrez,* Monsieur Ware!" the Abbé called out, pleasantly. "The gate is unlocked."

"You used to call me 'David,' Monsieur l'Abbé," the young man remarked, with a whimsical smile, as he seized the Abbé's hand in such a grip that it made him wince.

It was now a week since the arrival of Germaine and David. On the previous Sunday, the Abbé had seen them both for the first time at mass, but only in the distance. On the following day, however, he had the great fortune of being invited to dinner at the house on the Road of the Madonna.

And what a dinner it had been! It was a great event for the Abbé, and one which his memory would cherish long. Fresh *radis* from the garden; and *cervelles,* made especially delicious by some secret of Madame Sance's own; *gigot,* with *sauce chevreuil;* cold chicken; then *crêpe* for dessert; and, at the end, with the coffee,

a taste of the rum of the year 1848, got at the port of Bordeaux by Germaine's grandfather from a ship just in from Jamaica! And through it all, Germaine's mother doing the honors of the table, with the aid of her other daughter, Marthe; and the little doctor, wittier even than usual, as he insisted upon refilling one's glass with some rare old Burgundy he had brought up with his own hands from the cellar; and Germaine herself—why, in spite of her two years' sojourn in America, she had changed hardly at all! True, she was not quite so slender, and her luxurious black hair was arranged more in the mode, and the shy diffidence of the young girl had given place to the assurance and poise of a woman; but the roses of Gascony were still in her cheeks, her large eyes had the same modest light in them, and her smile was still astonishingly like the morning sunlight over the Pyrenees.

Never did the May sun look through dining-room windows on a happier group, although all spoke regretfully of Germaine's absent brother, Henri, lately appointed to a government position at Tarbes; and of young Robert, the little doctor's boy, who had been home the day before, resplendent in his Lycée uniform, but who, alas! had to return to school that very morning. As the Abbé covertly watched the returned couple, he smiled happily to himself. For when David turned to look at the woman by his side, which was often, there was an expression in his eyes that was easy for even the most unworldly curé to interpret. All of which gratified the Abbé so much that, with all his sober reserve, he became more talkative than usual and added much to the success of the dinner.

Just before David's arrival at his garden gate, the Abbé, busy over his roses, had been thinking of that dinner. And now, as the two walked up past the garden house, he reminded David of that happy occasion, adding that, in spite of all his questions that day, there were many things he had yet to ask: first of all, if he was still teaching the English literature in that college in the Department of the Ohio. The Abbé had to look up to address David, who was at least a foot taller.

But the young American was not paying heed. He had stopped square in front of the garden house and was looking up over the door at the grapevine that straggled toward the tile roof, spreading its wealth of new green leaves against the plastered wall. The Abbé followed the gaze of his visitor questioningly.

"What is it?" he asked, at length.

"I was thinking of the last time I came here, two summers ago. It was the end of July. You were on top of a ladder, picking grapes from that very vine there. They were the first, you said. There were only a few, and we ate them."

"That was the day we walked together to Sabazan."

"That's it! That's the time! You were hoping to become the priest there. What luck it was, though, that you got this parish instead! It certainly was a feather in your cap!"

The Abbé looked up, surprised.

"One serves God where He wills," he answered, simply.

The two proceeded up the path, along the edge of the little vineyard, until they came to a fig tree with

a wooden bench under it, facing the flower plot and the orchard. Here they sat down in the shade. David produced his pipe, and, after lighting it:

"I recollect, Monsieur l'Abbé, that you used to spend much of your time here in this garden. . . . What kind of trees are those over there?"

"Those to the left? Those are pear trees. Their fruit is named after Saint John, because it gets ripe about the time of Saint John's Day. . . . I have not much time for the garden now. A priest has another sort of garden—a very different sort of garden—to tend. It has more weeds than this garden has."

While the Abbé spoke, David was looking off beyond the garden and over the road to the stretch of fields and vineyards leading up to the long ridge of the forest. How restful it was! A question from the Abbé broke on his musings:

"And how does it seem to be back in our quiet country? When you were here before, you found many things to interest you, is it not so?"

"I'm not disappointed, Monsieur l'Abbé. But it isn't so easy to get adjusted to it all. It is so different from my country. You see, Monsieur l'Abbé, in America, everything is on the go. Nothing stands still. We are progressing all the time. Now, you take this place here. Nothing changes. Nothing whatever. Everything remains exactly as it was. Take your garden house. I noticed as I came in. The same piece of plaster is off on the side toward the road, showing the same old crumbling stones underneath; this very bench is just the same—it hasn't been painted while I was away. The village is the same—not a thing altered; and the people

look the same and do the same old things in the same old way."

The Abbé thought a moment. Then he added gently:

"And the Pyrenees, David; they, too, are the same—the very same!"

Perhaps David missed the Abbe's thought, for he went on:

"Why, last Sunday, after mass, I came upon the baker's stall set up in exactly the same spot in the market place where it was two years ago. The same baker was selling the same cakes as big as saucers, with the same hole in the middle."

"The price is not the same," remarked the Abbé. "Those cakes—*tortillons,* we call them—used to be one sou each. Now they are five sous. If you had arrived here early enough for Palm Sunday, you would have seen another custom of ours which has always been the same. You would have seen the children dressed in their new spring clothes, each carrying a laurel branch to the church to be blessed. The boys vied with one another as to who should bring the largest. The branches were gay with ribbons and hung here and there with those very *tortillons* you speak of. Some of the children found the gospel tedious and the mass too long for their patience, so that, finally, they could stand it no longer, and boldly ate their cakes right in church. . . . Speaking of children, there was something I meant to ask: when you and Madame Ware came back this time, I was half expecting—I was almost hoping . . ."

David colored a little.

"No, Monsieur l'Abbé," he laughed; "the fact is, we can't afford to have children—not just yet!"

The Abbé did not look at David. He was gazing straight ahead of him. In his mild eyes was astonishment, mingled with unbelief, as if in the presence of a monstrous heresy. . . . Presently a little girl passed by along the sunlit road driving a flock of geese. She had on a ragged dress, there was a hole in one of her stockings, and the other had fallen down, showing her chubby legs; set on her head was an old straw hat that was too large for her. She was a very little girl. She was singing random snatches of a song. Every now and then her singing would stop abruptly. Opposite the Abbé's gate, she stooped down to pick a yellow flower by the road.

After a while, the Abbé spoke:

"There is nothing," he said, "nothing that the people of this world can afford as well as children. Nothing."

"I do not want to argue, Monsieur l'Abbé. But that child that just passed—her parents are evidently so poor that they can't even dress her properly. It's pathetic! It is not right to bring children into the world if you can't care for them. What chance has a child like that against life? Already the little thing is put to work driving geese! Some day she'll marry some poor peasant and have more children than she can provide for, and end her days as she began them, driving geese."

"She was not only driving geese," observed the Abbé, slowly. "She was singing."

"Singing, now—yes. But as she grows older, think of what will happen! She will become like all the other peasant women around here; her hands will get hard and calloused and her figure bent by toil in the fields. Her face will become red and coarse; what attractions

she may yet have as a young girl will soon disappear. At forty, she will be old, old, and wear a black dress and a coif, without ever having tasted any of the pleasures of life. She won't be able to read, probably. Think of it! All the great poems and dramas of the world, the Homers, the Dantes, the Shakespeares—she will know nothing of them to her dying day! She will know only two things—suffering and toil, suffering and endless toil."

"She will know other things, David. Patience, for instance, she will learn that, as all our peasants do. And thrift, also; and perseverance, and courage, and self-denial; and self-control, David—that is a grievous hard thing to learn; and temperance; yes, and a certain wisdom, got from earth and sky through the changes of all the seasons—the best book of all, save only one; and then, the priceless affection of loved ones, she will learn that; and she will even have her innocent joys, prized all the more because well earned and all too rare. And, above all, her life makes one more to sing the praises of God, who created her,—the good God for whom there is no low, or high, or rich, or poor. Oh, the lives of our peasants are far from being poems; yet they are that of which great poems are made! . . . My own father and mother—they were both humbly born. When I came into the world, they were very poor; yet, they were both glad, glad! And I?—I have never been sorry for the gift of life!"

David remained silent. To the right of where they were sitting, one could see a stone wall, which marked the boundary of the Abbé's vineyard. Above the wall towered cypress trees, gracefully slender, tapering

toward the tops, through which one caught a glimpse of the sturdy tower of the church. David knew that beyond that long wall, beneath those tall cypresses, the dead of many generations were laid away to sleep. They dwelt very close together, there beyond the wall, under their crosses of wood and iron and stone!

Presently, the faint sound of voices was wafted over the wall on a stray breeze, and then was lost again. Soon afterwards came the harsh creak of the great iron gates leading from the cemetery to the road. A few moments later, an old man and a woman passed by on the road in front. David's attention was attracted to the man. There was something about him that was individual and arresting. He was short, well formed, and apparently well dressed, and his whitening hair, though thin, was long and hung down over his ears. David wished he were nearer so that he could see his face. His curiosity was aroused.

"Who is that, Monsieur l'Abbé? I never saw him before."

"He was away when you were here two years ago. His sister, whom you see with him, has always lived here. Lately he has come back to spend the rest of his days with her. His name is Hippolyte Caussade."

"What does he do? Has he a business?"

"One would hardly call it a business. You might say he is a historian, perhaps, although his interests are somewhat limited, and he has never written anything until lately. He is a very old friend of mine. We were boys together."

"Perhaps he has been a teacher of history, then? It would be interesting to meet him."

"I shall see that you two get acquainted. Nothing is easier. He was a teacher once. But most of his life he has been secretary of an archæological society over in Auch. Probably he knows more about the lore of Gascony than any other living man. Only, he has so much imagination that he himself is sometimes bothered to separate his facts from his fancies. Lately, he has been actually writing a book."

"I wish very much to know him. What is his book about?"

"Gascony. But especially about our village, in which he was born and of which he is very proud. He complains bitterly that Puech, in his *Histoire de La Gascogne,* mentions Aignan only twice."

"But this village of yours—what has ever happened here to make it important enough to write a book about?"

The Abbé reflected.

"You might ask Hippolyte. Recently, he has been spending days and days going over the old ruin of a house known as the Armagnac house, on the Street of the Church."

"I know the one you mean. It's that big old hulk of a house next to the covered poultry market, isn't it? I remember now—the one they say belonged to the Count of Armagnac centuries ago."

"That's it. It's not very safe inside. The floors are giving way and one has to be careful of the stairs. Sometimes Hippolyte takes his manuscripts there and does his writing. . . . He had an amusing adventure there lately."

"An adventure? In that empty house? This grows

interesting. You must tell me about it, Monsieur l'Abbé!"

The Abbé hesitated. Finally:

"I don't know. I certainly wouldn't tell any one who lives here, for Hippolyte would never hear the last of it. No, they would plague him about it to his dying day. But you do not belong here, so it does not matter. Very well, this is how it was.

XVIII

THE GHOSTS OF THE HOUSE OF ARMAGNAC

"You must know that the windows of my bedroom look straight across the *ruelle* upon the windows of the Armagnac house. One night, about a month ago, I could not sleep. Finally, I got up out of bed and went to my window and drew aside the curtains to see how near to daylight it was—for my clock had stopped and I had no way of telling the time.

"It was still pitch dark outside; but what was my amazement to see light shining out from the second floor of the Armagnac house! I could hardly believe my eyes; but there it was, sending its yellow glow out of that double window with the trefoils in stone. By the way, there is a fireplace in that room, wide and high and richly carved, with the Armagnac coat of arms on it—a brave figure of a lion against a shield, rearing upon his hind legs, his teeth bared, his tail lashing. It was carved there over nine hundred years ago by Bernard II, who was then Count of Armagnac, and who built this castle, which covered many times as much ground as it covers now, including the poultry market, and the houses of Matignon, Brettes, Laclotte, Abel Dumon, and the Hotel Sarrade. . . ."

"But the light, Monsieur l'Abbé—the light you saw in the window!"

"Ah, yes, the light! I could not imagine what it could

mean. At first, I was greatly alarmed and thought the place was on fire. And yet, after I watched it a moment, I knew better. The light was too faint and too steady, except for a flicker now and then, such as one would naturally expect from a candle. I tried to look into the room; but the window over there was just high enough above my own to make it impossible to see anything but a portion of the rafters along the ceiling and the upper walls, which are in a terrible state of decay.

"I hastily put on my clothes, and, without awakening my father and my Aunt Madeleine, found my way out the door and around the corner and up the narrow alley that runs to the Street of the Church, along which I approached the front of the Armagnac house in a hurry. Dawn was just beginning to break, and I could see fairly well. Just as I got to Courrou's harness shop, the massive door of the Armagnac house was abruptly thrown open, and a man rushed out into the street, bareheaded, looking this way and that, as if not knowing where to go next. When he saw me approaching, he rushed to me—and who do you think it was? It was none other than Hippolyte Caussade, his long hair disheveled, his eyes wild. For the moment he could not speak. He was breathless from his exertions in getting down the stairs and out of the house and also from something more—fear. I put my hand on his shoulder and demanded what was the matter.

"For a moment, he appeared dazed. He looked at me. He looked up and down the street. Then he said, in a sheepish way:

" 'I was mistaken. It was nothing.'

" 'What is it that is nothing?' I asked. 'You are not yourself, Hippolyte. What has happened?'

" 'I thought they had come. They were setting fire—oh, it is nothing, I tell you!' And Hippolyte looked more ashamed than ever.

"I looked up at the windows above us. Two of the shutters were open. I saw no flames. In fact, no light at all.

" 'You certainly are mistaken, Hippolyte,' I said, as calmly as I could, without asking him what it consumed me to know—what on earth he was doing there at this time of the night, or, rather, morning. 'Let us go in and see,' I added, quietly taking him by the arm. For I could easily perceive that he was not at all himself.

"After a little urging, and after looking up at the windows several times, he consented to go in with me. Once inside the hall, I shut the street door after us, so that we were in total darkness. For the door is usually closed and locked, and if anybody happened to be astir in the street, I did not want him to become curious and poke into the place and find us there. I sniffed the air, but there was no smell of smoke that I could detect. No flames. No sign of fire. I listened. There was no sound. We mounted the stairs together, testing each step carefully as we went. When we got to the top, we cautiously felt our way back over the rotted flooring toward the room with the fireplace and the trefoil windows. As we neared it, a feeble light streamed out from the door and guided our way. Hippolyte drew back more and more as we went on; but finally, we came to

the doorway and looked within. There, in the center of the room, on a rickety table, was a lantern. Near it, a chair was overturned. The table and the floor were littered with sheets of paper. As we stood there, a rat scurried over the floor and disappeared into a far corner.

"Hippolyte reluctantly followed me as I advanced into the room. There was nothing else there—nothing whatever that I could see, except an ink bottle and a pen on the table with the lantern, and Hippolyte's hat on the floor. I stepped over and righted the fallen chair, then stooped down to pick up some of the papers. They were sheets of manuscript, written in a fine hand. I knew that writing. It was Hippolyte's own, without a doubt. I read a few lines on one of the sheets. The ink was scarcely dry:

> "The Black Prince, in 1355, arrived at Bordeaux in great force, resolved to invade Armagnac. Count John I of Armagnac, lieutenant of the King in all the countries of Languedoc, did his utmost to prepare for a stout defense, calling upon not only the nobles and the bourgeois, but the peasants to come to his aid and to meet in appointed places, where they should be recognized by the sign of the white cross. . . .

"I laid this sheet with the others on the table and turned to Hippolyte. He was quite himself again, and looked resentfully at my meddling with his papers.

" 'You said something about a fire,' I observed.

" 'Forgive me, Pierre,' he said, in a shamefaced man-

ner. 'The fact is, I have been exceedingly foolish. It was this way. . . .'

"I stopped him. 'Let us put out the lantern and leave before the whole village is up,' I insisted. For it was getting light, and the angelus might ring at any moment. 'After mass,' I added. And with this, I handed Hippolyte his hat and we found our way downstairs and out into the street again, safe and sound, with the incredibly good fortune of seeing no one, probably because it was yet earlier than I thought."

The Abbé paused in his recital. He seemed to be lost in some recollection. David became impatient:

"But what was the solution of it all? I am still as much mystified as you yourself were when you first saw the light. What was Monsieur Caussade doing there, and why did he rush out into the street and say there was a fire?"

"Let us say it was the rats," finally replied the Abbé. "The worms may have had something to do with it; but mostly it was the rats. You see, Bibé once tried to use the house as a granary; but the rats got in and ate up the grain, and he had to give it up. . . . The place literally swarms with rats. Madame Lacoste's house is near by. Not long ago, they consumed all her chickens, twenty-eight of them, and her twelve ducks. And as for the worms, if you stand still there in the dark, you can hear them boring, boring, boring, incessantly boring into the rafters over your head."

"But, Monsieur l'Abbé, still I don't understand!"

"Well, imagine to yourself Hippolyte sitting up there in that lonely ruin of a house, writing his book, with no company but his lantern, which throws strange

shadows about the mysterious fringes of the room, and with no sound save the scratching of his pen over the paper. The hours pass. The distant noises from the street slowly die away—the last voices, the slamming of the last door, the creak of the last shutter across the *ruelle,* closed for the night. He writes on, wholly engrossed in his work, which is a highly vivid account of a page in our Gascon history that has never been written in its details before. He is living no longer in the present; he is living six centuries ago. The Black Prince is invading Armagnac. The Count of Armagnac, with his hurriedly gathered troops, marches to meet the enemy, with brave Genoese and Lombard bowmen in front. But, alas, disaster awaits them. The Count and his hosts flee in disorderly rout. Onward the Black Prince advances along the left bank of the Garonne to enter Armagnac on the south. He sets fire to village after village. Plaisance is pillaged and burned. Forward the enemy sweeps in the dark of the night toward Aignan, toward our own village, here, the stronghold of the Count of Armagnac, the seat of his castle—where Hippolyte is sitting, awaiting his onslaught, trembling with eagerness as he writes the mighty epic, his mind keenly on the alert, hypersensitive, vividly living out this picture of flaming war and ruin. His pen speeds over the paper faster and faster. Once, he is startled by strange sounds in the deathlike stillness. His pen poises in air. He listens intently. Ah, he is reassured. It is only the worms, going 'gre-gre-gre' in the rotten beams over his head. Still, even that harmless sound has frightened him and served to set his tense nerves still more on edge. The Black Prince has made a breach in the

fortification wall with his battering rams. . . . 'Gre-gre-gre!' . . . The sounds of the boring worms above Hippolyte's head blend with the distant blackguards at their work. Into the streets of the village they swarm. Hippolyte's pen moves in a frenzy now—the mood is on him—he is writing history that will live:

"The tocsin sounds madly from the watch-tower, but it is too late. Those who rush out from their houses to resist are ruthlessly struck down. Torches are already being applied to the dwellings and shops, and the flames are leaping up, lighting the roofs and walls of the village with a sinister flare. On the mob surges, in one direction, now—past the building of the drapers and weavers, toward the Count of Armagnac's castle, whose massive front is already alight with reflected fires. They inspect its defenses, and speedily gain entrance by ramming open a door that leads into the kitchens. On they come with their torches, the motley crew, their feet scuffling over the floors. . . .

"You see, David, if it were a couple of rats scurrying over the boards of the upper story, Hippolyte, in his excited frame of mind, would not have known the difference!

". . . Through the storerooms they advance, through the refectory. Now the stairs creak with their footsteps —they make a sudden rush upward! It is the end! . . .

"All the army of rats in the house of Armagnac have heard the fall of Hippolyte's chair and are scampering

tumultuously to safety. And Hippolyte, routed by the hosts of the Black Prince, is plunging down the front stairs into the street!"

"One might make a story of it," David finally observed, when the Abbé was through. "Say that one called it, 'The Ghosts of the House of Armagnac.'"

The Abbé, who had been smiling over Hippolyte's adventure, immediately became serious:

"Pray do not! Hippolyte would not like it. It would not be just to Hippolyte. Perhaps I should not have told you of this silly episode of his. As I said, Hippolyte is very imaginative."

It was now late afternoon. The shadows were lengthening. The two got up from the seat under the fig tree. The Abbé's breviary had slipped from the pocket of his cassock to the ground. David picked it up and handed it to him. They walked together down past the vineyard to the garden house, where the Abbé paused to put away his tools and lock the door. Then he accompanied his visitor out the gate and up the road toward the village. They passed the cemetery, where the life-size Jesus on His cross now cast its shadow nearly to the eastern wall; then on by the church, until they stood in the narrow street in front of the Armagnac house, the roof of which received the last rays of the sun. The heavy doors were closed tight. On one of them was a great round knocker of iron, centuries old. The place looked more deserted than ever. Wooden shutters were over the windows, reminding one of the closed eyes of the dead. Nevertheless, the walls still looked solid and sturdy, built as they were, of huge blocks of stone.

"It will last hundreds of years yet," remarked the

Abbé. "As you say, nothing changes much in this place from year to year. We build to last. Take the walls of Madame Sance's house—where you are staying—they are over a foot thick. We are firmly rooted in the past. Yes, our roots strike deep."

"There is something in what you say," replied David, with more than his usual thoughtfulness. "In America, now, our houses are old in ten years. We build to tear down. To build something better! Monsieur l'Abbé, things can be made to last too long. That is why a village like this is so far behind the times. One must give up the old if one is to make way for progress."

"Progress? Well, David, it all depends upon what one means," retorted the Abbé, his kindly old eyes uplifted to David's face, so youthful, eager, ambitious.

They walked on a little farther in silence. Opposite the village pump, they parted with a pleasant, *"Bonsoir!"* and the Abbé slowly proceeded on his way to the Back Street and home, shaking his head and muttering the word *"progress"* reflectively a number of times.

XIX

ALL THINGS FLOW

(From a Letter of the Abbé Pierre to the Abbé Rivoire)

I have the great need to confide in some one. My thoughts disturb me.

It is all on account of some talk I have been having with a young American who is here in our village for the summer—the same young American I wrote you about two years ago—the one who married the daughter of my old friend, Jean-Louis Sance.

I suppose some allowance must be made. An American, fresh from his own country, so new and so untried by time, cannot be expected to understand an old civilization like ours. Still, it is disappointing that the very things of our village that I take comfort in—things that have been cherished for hundreds of years—do not impress him at all; or, what is the more surprising, strike him unfavorably. For instance, when I was telling him lately that a certain house on our Street of the Church, which is now nine centuries old, would probably last hundreds of years more, he merely answered that there was such a thing as a house being made to last too long, and that our clinging to the old things as we do keeps us from progressing.

Now, that does not trouble me so very much; for I

confess that I am not greatly envious of what the Americans seem to consider "progress." People may have wealth and all sorts of cunning inventions, and boast about their incessant energy and their bigness, and even make the most entertaining noise in the world announcing how "progressive" they are, without progressing at all in any real sense. I do not say that is the case with America—I know lamentably little about that country; I merely state abstract possibilities.

No, what does disturb me is that this little place of my birth, whose every stone I know and love, and whose people are now my special care, may be actually going backwards. I ask not that new things replace the old, as Monsieur Ware does; but I do ask this: that the old things—the things that are worth while—be not lost. And yet, I fear—oh, I greatly fear!

First of all, the population of our village is dwindling year by year. People die or go away, and nobody—nobody at all—takes their places. Consider! Two decades ago, when Monsieur Sance was our mayor, there were sixteen hundred souls living in our commune; to-day, there are a scant thousand. The Sance family itself is an excellent instance of what I have in mind. There were four children—as fine children as you would find in all Gascony; but where are they now? Angèle—she is married and lives in Bordeaux. Germaine—she, as I have told you, has married this American, and lives in his country. True, she is back here this summer; but will she ever come again? Henri—he is now an administrator of taxes in Tarbes. So, you see, there is only Marthe, who is the wife of our mayor, left. The father was laid away in our cemetery years ago, and it

will not be long before the mother will join him there. Our cemetery! That, alas! is the one thing that appears to prosper here! And even there, the life-size cross of the Crucified One is beginning to lean a little to the east. I have been unable to get any one to repair it.

Then our houses. Monsieur Ware has made me see some things as I have never seen them before. One has to admit that our houses are slowly falling into a state of ruin. The roofs sag more and more; the plaster cracks and falls off and is never replaced. No new houses go up. Even the châteaux on the hills, some of them very old, with their square towers, which once defended us, are gradually falling to pieces. The only thing that has been built in our village for a number of years is—a monument to the dead! It stands in the market place, in blessed memory of fifty-four of our best young men who bravely marched away from us to fight the battles of France, and who nevermore returned.

Speaking of the market place, it itself is enough to sadden one, so much has it altered, even during my small lifetime. When I was a little boy, the donjon-tower, once part of our ancient walls, had already been torn down by the council. But there was still the old market-hall, an immense pentagonal building, used in the middle ages by the drapers and weavers; and there was Grandfather Sance's house near by. Both are gone, now; and Grandfather Sance, he is gone—he who tried to make this village a better place by building a bank and a wheat mill. But the bank and the mill—they are gone with the rest. As I remarked to David, we are deeply rooted in the past. But I have seen trees, whose roots were deep enough, die from the top down,

until the roots—they, too, went. Or were the roots really diseased in the first place—although we knew it not? I do not know.

After all, you will say, it is the people who are left that count. But listen, dear friend! I sometimes think the very people here are changing, perhaps faster than anything else. I mentioned the châteaux. Well, some of our most ancient families, hard pressed for money, have moved away, having sold their châteaux to rich foreigners, who care nothing about Gascony and even laugh at our people and their ways. But you will remind me that the peasants, who, after all, are the bone and sinew of any country—you will remind me that surely they are the same. You will be thinking of how conservative they are—how hostile to innovations of any kind. Well, I know the peasants—I think I can say I know them as well as almost any man. Am I not in their houses every day? It is I, their Curé, who baptize their children, who marry them, who administer to them the last sacrament, and who sometimes hear the intimate outpourings of their hearts. And what do I find? This: that many of our peasants are gradually changing their entire outlook upon life. Yes, that is the simple, if astonishing, truth.

Mark you! The other day, I drove out the road towards Fromentas and had dinner with a young peasant and his wife. They had married only three months before. It was I who had officiated at the wedding, and it was no simple affair, I can tell you! Well, I noticed that Monsieur Douat's dining room had a new floor in it of which any one might be proud, made of hexagonal tiles, white and black, in regular design. Above the

great beams that ran across the ceiling were visible the yellow boards of a new floor for the chamber rebuilt for his bride—a room in the most delicate of pinks, with a set of light gray furniture, beautifully carved, from Bordeaux, and fit for a castle! And that was not all. Out in the yard I saw fantastic looking objects with iron wheels; and what do you think they were? Of all things, farming machinery, made in America! Douat explained to me that with such machinery one man can actually do the labor of several, and then not have to work so very hard, either. Already I had known of several peasants who had taken to having wood stoves in their fireplaces made out of the round oil cans left by the Americans during their stay in France when the war was going on; but this Douat's enterprise had gone far beyond that, and I must confess that it set me to thinking. I know another rich peasant near here who has recently bought a threshing machine. How different it was in my youth! We needed no machines then! No, we accomplished it very well, out on the hard clay of the yard. First we swept the yard thoroughly; then, with a broom we smeared it with a mixture of cows' dung and water, which made a still harder surface and prevented dust; then we drove a pair of oxen round and round to trample the grain. Many of our peasants still do it that way, or with flails. But the time will soon come when all the old ways of doing things are no more.

My friend, the American, hails all this as a symptom of progress. I will not deny it. He says that the peasant is gradually being educated to a larger and better notion of living. Now, I am not so sure. As I

said to him, this new notion of living simply seems to be this: to seek pleasure. This is not only true of our peasants, but of the younger generation in our village. They do not want to work any more than they have to. They are desirous of being ever on the go. They no longer obey their elders. They have become more and more unmanageable. As soon as they have a chance, they spurn us and go to the cities. What is the result? Once the present generation of old people is dead, there will be nobody to do the work. Nobody. Already it is hard to get workers for the vineyards. Each year, it grows more difficult.

All this merely leads up to the one thing that weighs so heavily on my heart. When people begin to seek pleasure as the chief thing in life, then the affairs of the spirit begin to be neglected. They become selfish; they lose the sense of moral distinctions; their souls are forgotten, and their bodies become everything. A pleasure-seeking people is an irreligious people; in the end they become indifferent to the Church, or even hostile to it.

When I expressed something of the kind to Monsieur Ware, he objected strenuously. He said that he couldn't see why it was such a terrible thing for our young people to pursue happiness; that most people have always been more or less Epicurean in their tastes, anyway.

Now, I have no great admiration for Epicurus, as I told him. But one ought at least to do justice, even to a pagan. So I protested in this manner: I asked him if he realized how far we had degenerated from that renowned Athenian.

"Degenerated?" he echoed.

"Yes," I said, "degenerated. To call our age Epicurean is to be strangely unfair to Epicurus."

"But he, like our young people, frankly made happiness the end of life!"

I asked him, then, if he had ever read a certain letter of Epicurus to Menœceus, in which one finds that the pleasures he really recommended were of the mind, not of the body; and that the happiness he taught came strictly from within a man's soul, and was utterly independent of outer fortune. Then I explained to him how our new generation has deteriorated to this: their happiness depends solely upon pleasure-making devices outside themselves, like automobiles, and consists of nothing but the bodily sensations they are able to arouse. I concluded by saying:

"Hedonism is bad enough; but when it is a hedonism not of the inner spirit, as with Epicurus, but of externals only, as with us, it means the dissolution of morals and an assault upon true religion."

Alas! If I could only believe that this is a mere theory of mine, as Monsieur Ware was prompt to insist! But how can I shut my eyes to plain facts? The truth is that the young people of this village are becoming more and more indifferent to God. More and more of our children are being sent to the State school, instead of to the school which is under the sheltering guidance of the Church. Less and less of the younger generation come to mass and confession. The evening prayer is poorly attended—only a few old women and the pupils of the school, who are compelled to go. The Sacred Heart of Jesus bleeds in vain; they care not!

But enough of this! Yesterday, as I was driving out

the road toward Sabazan, I noticed the pinks and purples of the very first heather blooms shyly peeping out of the green of the hedges. Every June I find myself watching for the first appearance of these tiny flowers, so delicate and yet so sturdy, and, above all, so fraught with memories for me. I remember when, as a small child, I gathered some and took them to my mother, as if I were bearing her something very precious. Indeed, yesterday I was constrained to stop Poule and get down out of my cart to pluck a few for old times' sake. All the way home they aroused a train of thought that helped to soothe me. Amid all the changes of the seasons, thought I, these blooms come back to us every year. The summer of their little lives soon passes away; at length, their petals wither and fall; autumn fades into dreariness; the wind from the north mercilessly snatches the last leaves from where they cling, and whirls them whither it wills; and at last the snow lays itself like a shroud over the dead year. Then, all of a sudden comes the miracle: Spring is reborn and sweeps on to the glory of another June; one day you look in the hedges, and behold! There are the pink heather blossoms bravely smiling at you once more!

So it is, perhaps, with these changes in my village that disturb me so much. For, after all, things cannot remain the same. Not in this world. As Héraclite, the Dark, is reported to have said, "All things flow"; adding that "you cannot step twice into the same river; for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you." And yet, when my pupils used to dwell on this melancholy doctrine overmuch, I reminded them of another utterance of that same weeping philosopher: "God is both

day and night, winter and summer," and of how he tells us that "the way of man has no wisdom; but that of God has."

Truly we priests, who live in and for the eternal things, waste our time and show little faith if we worry too much about the mutations of this world. You can see how greatly at fault I have been. We know that, amid all the things that pass away, through all the seasons of men's fickle lives, the blossoms of our immortal faith can never die. The defeats of God are only in the seeming. Only His victories remain.

Forgive me, my dear friend, for writing in such fashion to you whose thoughts are ever better than mine. . . . To revert to our village—there is one thing at least to be thankful for: people and things are not changing here so fast as in other places, since we are away from any railway and are off the main roads. Monsieur Ware pretends that this is precisely what ails us. But I cannot regret our quiet isolation from the rest of the world. No, my people are dear to me, and I am glad.

XX

MISÉRÉRÉ

The day of St. John, the longest day in the year, had come and gone. June with her fresh and innocent beauty, first bride of Summer, had yielded her place to the warm and voluptuous languor of July. In the vineyards, the grapes drank greedily of the giddy intoxication of the sun, until their cheeks became as red as drunken revelers.

It was mid-afternoon. Eastward from the village, the Road of the Madonna, between its double row of plane trees, lay in dappled shadow. At this hour, the road was quiet and untraveled. Not a soul could be seen. The statue of the Virgin kept a lonely vigil, her shapely hands upraised in prayer, her crown gleaming against the cloudless blue of the sky. On the tip of one of its stars, a butterfly alighted for a moment, then was gone.

If only the Queen of Angels stood a few hundred feet nearer the village, she would have faced a far more inviting prospect than the sun-baked walls of Sidonie's house, with its patches of plaster fallen off. She could then have looked across a luxurious hedge, with a long pond just behind it, into the cool depths of the little doctor's garden, where, on a wooden bench under a tree, a young man and woman were sitting. The Mother Most Amiable might have been pleased at the

sight of these two lovers—lovers still, notwithstanding that they had been married now for nearly two years —or, better, lovers yet more because of that blessed fact! In days gone by, the young woman there, now dressed wholly in white, with abundant black hair framing a face unmistakably Gascon, had often placed wreaths at the Virgin's feet, and had once planted a lily at the base of her pedestal. It is possible that the Mother Most Admirable might not have approved so whole-heartedly of the tall, good-looking young man at her side. He was an American. He did not even know how to pray to Her, the Refuge of Sinners. His soul walked in darkness.

The young man was smoking a pipe. After awhile, he knocked the ashes out on the end of the bench and sighed:

"Only one more month! I hate to leave this place!"

"No more than I do, David. Mother is getting feeble. Have you noticed it? I sometimes wonder . . ."

"We'll come back next summer. Yes, we'll come back —that is, if we can possibly afford it. Don't worry, Dearest."

But Germaine looked very sad. So David's arm stole about her waist and he leaned over and kissed her.

There was silence for a few moments. A breeze stirred in the tall pine trees. The sound of a hoe came from the direction of Marinette's garden over the wall.

Finally, David spoke.

"I have been thinking. The fact is, I'm sorry I said some of the things I've said to the Abbé—they were

half in fun, you know—about the village. Especially after what has happened. I've been wanting to talk to him since; but I've seen him only once."

"It's pitiful, David! He thought the world of his father."

"Still, his father was very old. He was nearly ninety. Octave says he simply died of old age."

"Summer after summer, while the Abbé was professor near Paris, he came home here to see his father. How proud old Simon was when his son was appointed Curé."

"It's nearly two weeks now. As I say, I've seen the Abbé only once since."

"When was that?"

"I went to his garden several times; but the gates were locked and he wasn't there. Then, three or four days ago it was, I saw him as he was turning out of the Back Street toward the church. You have no idea how changed he looked! There was a stoop to his shoulders. His hands were behind his back. His head was bowed. He did not see me at first. I had to speak to him twice. When he raised his head to look at me—well, you know how he always smiles in that kindly way of his and how his face lights up—this time, his eyes had a far-away look in them, and there was unutterable sadness in his smile. His face had less color even than usual, and his cheeks were sunken. When he spoke, his voice had a gentle quaver in it—I cannot express what it conveyed to me! Before I could engage him in conversation, he had passed on, as if he had forgotten me."

The two sat there a time longer, regarding the shad-

ows of the trees in the water of the pond in front of them. There was the sound of a ripple, and a duck swam out into the sunlight and made a sudden dive to the bottom. Presently, the clop-clop of wooden shoes could be heard, approaching along the road, until, at last, the head of Cocharaux, crowned with a wide-brimmed straw hat, came into view above the high hedge, bobbing up and down toward the village.

From across the drive to the right a shutter was thrown open. It was the window of Madame Sance's bedroom. She would soon come out and sit with her sewing under the marquise at the top of the steps. A minute later, Marthe, Germaine's sister, appeared in the doorway, looking up and down the drive, then over the wall into the garden. The two young people hailed her; they got up from the bench and leisurely walked through the pine trees toward the house.

Now, at this very moment, in the little hamlet of Mauser, over beyond the Forest of Aignan, a priest was just leaving the home of a peasant. He went out to the road where he had left his horse and cart, gathered his cassock about him, and made as if to mount to the seat. He hesitated. Finally, he abandoned his first purpose, crossed the road and unlatched a wooden gate, which he entered and closed behind him. Before him stretched the upward slope of a path overgrown with grass and wild flowers, and almost shut off in several places by straggling bushes. Looking at the face of this priest, one would say: "Here is the face of a man with the heart of a child." One had only to contemplate the large, deep-set, gray eyes, kindly, wistful, with wrinkles at the outer corners such as are made by one who

knows how to smile; eyes whose modest regard held thoughtfulness in them, as if they had often seen things beyond the veil; one had only to look at the strong, distinguished nose; at the generous and sensitive mouth; at the frail, slender body, which reminded one less of common clay than of something spiritual that spoke through it, to feel that here was one of those men who inspire unlimited trust in others—a man whom no one would have the heart to harm.

The Abbé was already part way up the path. Soon he came to some trees. As he walked under their shade, he removed his hat to the cool of the breeze, which blew his sparse, gray hair over his forehead. Presently he emerged from the trees and confronted the object of his walk: a little ruin of a church, built of rough stones, with a low tile roof, broken and sagging, and a tiny bell-tower half fallen to decay. Set in the thick walls were several windows, narrow and fortress-like; the glass had long since been broken out of them.

The Abbé made his way toward the door just under the belfry—a crude door made of heavy planks of weather-beaten oak, from which the paint had vanished years ago. He seized the rusty iron handle and shook it. The door budged a little. He pushed it with his shoulder. It finally opened with difficulty, scraping along the floor. He did not bother to close the door. No one ever came to this place. Yes, one was alone here!

Even with the door open, it was dark inside, after the bright sun. One's eyes had to get accustomed to the gloom. Through little apertures in the roof, could be seen the blue of the sky; only, it did not seem like the sky—it seemed like glimpses of far-off, unfamiliar

space. From the massive beams of the ceiling, loose boards gaped downward. Along the floor of square, red stones, wooden benches were set in rows, with an aisle down the middle. They had no backs. Most of them were broken.

The Abbé walked slowly toward the altar and sat down on one of the benches. He sat there a long time, a motionless figure, his head bowed, his hands clasped before him. Memories slowly came to him—dear, dead memories of many years ago—of the time when he was a little boy. Here in this hamlet, soon after he was born, his parents had lived for awhile. His father and mother—they were not old, then. No, they were very young. Think of it! Those two were once actually young, with the dreams of youth! He remembered his mother. She was very beautiful—at least, he thought of her as beautiful. She died when she was still young. . . . And now his father!

For quite a while the Abbé sat there, his head bowed in thought. The death of his father had been harder to bear than he would have supposed. He reviewed his father's long life: his years on years of toil, his uncomplaining patience through it all, his quiet dignity. It was true his father had not been a man of great knowledge; he was not versed in books. But he had a real respect for learning, and that is something. Also he knew much of life that his son would never know, although he had never been outside of Gascony. How he had loved all things Gascon! Yes, a good Gascon was his father, with good old Gascon traits: independent, proud, brave, practical, more patient than most Gascons, and not so quick tempered.

"It seems impossible. . . . It was only three weeks ago that we walked together in the sun to the market-place and back. . . . But I am guilty of wrong if I think of him only as he was in the flesh. My father was not those eyes, that forehead, that nose, that mouth, that frame that walked about and was finally laid under the ground—that is not the way God knew him, and that is not the way I must think of him! . . . No more than the shape of a rose resembles its fragrance, or a nightingale, her song, does the body resemble its soul!"

After a time, the Abbé slowly arose and moved toward the front of the church. He lingered before the altar of carved wood, covered with broken plaster reliefs, edged in faded gold. At the center, on the door of the tabernacle, was wrought the image of Christ on His cross. For some reason the Abbé regarded this for several minutes, his eyes especially dwelling upon the wound in Jesus' side, and the nails in his hands and feet.

"After He arose, no one ever touched our Lord except where the nails had rent His flesh. Blessed be our sufferings, through which, alone, we draw close unto Him!"

The Abbé turned back along the south wall toward the door. He came to a bench, broken and tipped on one side. A sudden memory arrested him. He leaned over and righted the bench. Then he looked around.

"Yes, it may be this very bench. I am sure it was here my mother would sit with me during mass. It was her favorite place."

A tear stole down his cheek, which he wiped away with his hand.

He walked on toward the open door. His lips moved: *"Eternal rest give them, O Lord; and let perpetual light shine upon them; may they rest in peace!"*

The Abbé passed out into the open air. A flood of sunshine lay over the hillside. Along the faint path that led downward, the blue chicory flowers looked trustingly up at him. Butterflies, white and yellow, floated over the long grasses. The swift notes of a skylark thrilled the air, a lilt of sudden melody, ecstatic, ineffable. The Abbé followed the bird with his eyes until it was lost in the sky.

Then he took a deep breath, and started down the path toward the road, where Poule was impatiently waiting to take her master home.

(1)

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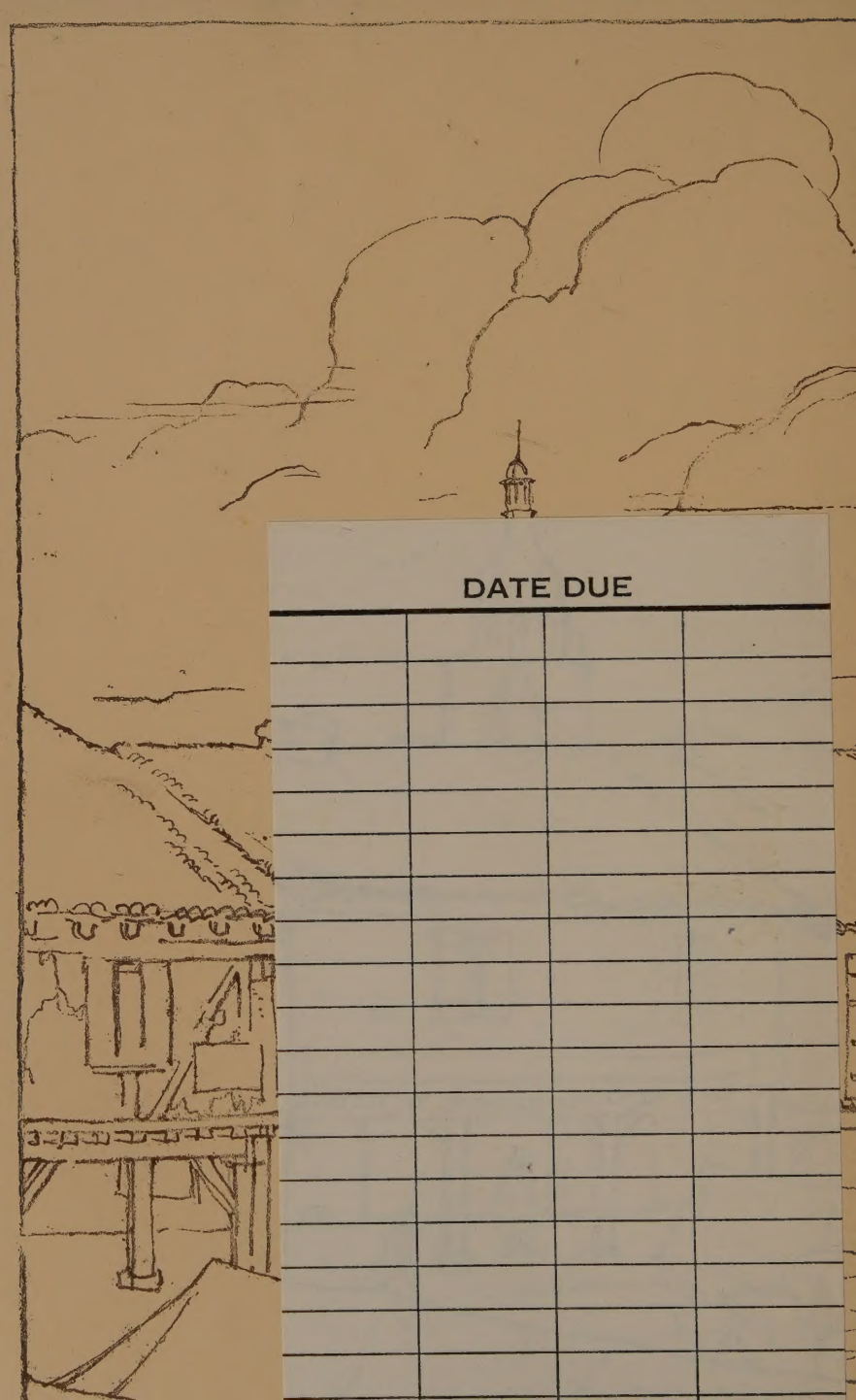

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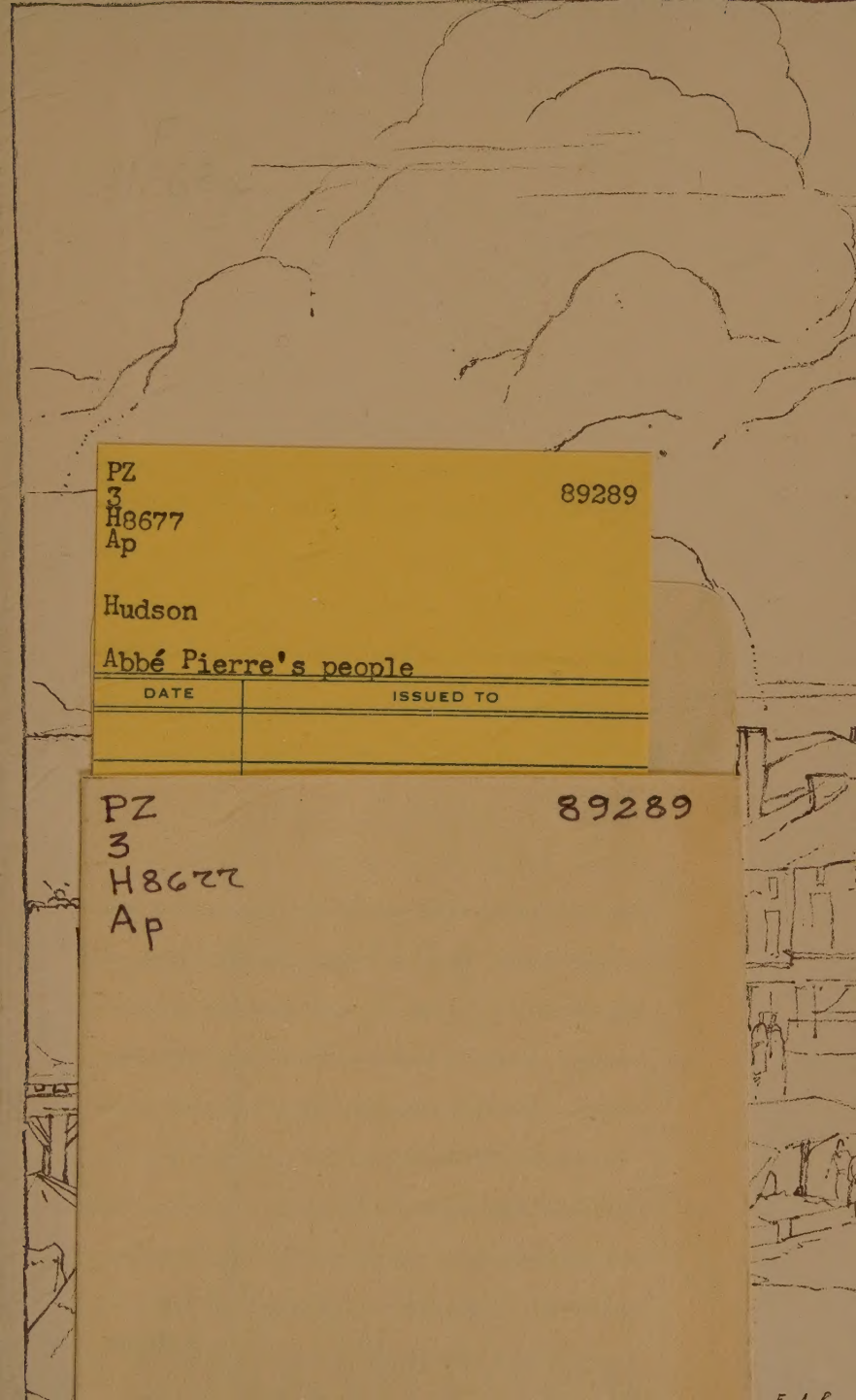

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